



SAEED AKHTAR MIRZA

MEMORY

IN THE AGE OF

amnesia



*{a personal history of **our** times}*

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For my father, Farhat Akhtar Mirza

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WHY I WRITE

Is it because this is a messed-up world that needs to be decoded? Perhaps. Is it also because I am messed up too, and I feel the need to unburden myself? Once again, perhaps. Or, to combine the two uncertainties, is it because I am messed up because we live in a messed-up world which has a messed-up economic and political system that cannot guarantee most of the people on the planet any assurance of a job, decent education, affordable healthcare or the shelter of a home—a system that cannot, in fact, guarantee anything?

That seems to be the answer.

The net result is an alarming rise in inequality and anger which has led to vicious sectarian and nationalist hysteria across the world as ordinary people try to make some sense of this state of affairs. This era of uncertainty has been exacerbated with the engineering of horrific wars that have left hundreds of thousands of dead and created millions of refugees who are trying desperately to escape to safer futures. Millions more are economic migrants trying to reach lands that can give them some semblance of dignity. We are living in a world of social, political and economic upheaval.

Can I decode all of this? I don't know.

What follows is a series of essays, tales and folktales, sometimes tales within tales, conversations, random encounters, metaphors and soliloquies. Some are real, others imagined. It mixes up the past with the present and India with the world, and looks through the fog to the possibility of a future. Through this mural and collage, I have attempted to unravel the meaning of words like 'terror', 'freedom', 'patriotism' and 'national interest'. In our frantic and precarious times, these are words

unleashed by multinational media houses that, very often, serve as echo chambers for powerful countries, corporations or financial institutions. They often also serve as a convenient camouflage to cover a lust for power and control.

Put bluntly, these words can also be hogwash. And in this game of hysterical wordplay, the word 'democracy' has been completely devalued. The battle that lies ahead is in giving it meaning once again.

Does all of this sound terribly political? It is. But, beyond this idea of taking on the world, my book is also about ordinary people, our dreams and nightmares. It is in my encounters with these 'unheard' voices that I have always emerged a little wiser, a little better.

THE GUJARAT LEGACY

The parliamentary elections of 2014 in India are long over, and another one is soon approaching. A man has been installed as the prime minister of my country who represents a political and ideological mindset¹ that I oppose and find deeply disturbing.² His contentious and questionable journey to the pinnacle of power has been documented thoroughly and no amount of wizardry of words and convoluted arguments by admiring political pundits and fans and his own, personal amnesia of what he did to arrive at where he is, can erase that history. That scar is permanent.

Nevertheless, no matter what my assessment may be, he was democratically elected by the people of our country and has swept into power with such a force that any semblance of a credible opposition has almost completely vanished. His invincibility—backed by a money-and-media juggernaut³—has since then been at times upstaged and has even faltered in some crucial elections.

The painful conclusion that I draw from his victory was that, for the people of India, at least to the 31 per cent who voted for him vehemently, his background didn't matter. For them it was simple: what happened, happened. The country had to move on and there was no future in looking over one's shoulder at the past.

For these people, it was a memory erased or overlooked.

I was also bothered by the fact that so many Indians who had not voted for him were surprised by this demagogue's sweeping victory. Couldn't they see this avalanche coming? How did they miss the signs, and there were many over the years, that would lead up to a situation like this?

To understand what I am getting at, I have to jog our collective

memories. I have to go back to the time when India became a Republic with a written Constitution. It was the time when our leaders defined the nation to the people of India and to the world. We were sovereign, secular and democratic. Here was a country that was primarily feudal, caste- and community-ridden, was born out of incredible communal slaughter and the largest mass migration of peoples in history, and yet had the courage to look into the future with a sense of purpose and, most importantly, a sense of poetry. It was to be a multi-religious, pluralistic and inclusive nation that guaranteed all its citizens free speech and equal rights.

Lurking in the shadows were forces, though much smaller in number yet potent in influence, that were vehemently opposed to this ideal. They had a different agenda and a far simpler notion of what our country was all about: India was overwhelmingly Hindu and therefore should be seen as such. Besides, it was not the free-flowing and expansive Hinduism of tolerance and acceptance that was envisioned, but rather a much narrower and bigoted brahminical perception of the universe, in which free speech, contrarian opinion and equality for all was unacceptable.

Within fifteen years of our Independence, the slow dismantling of the institutions that had made our country unique began to occur. It started with a creeping corruption in politics, the steady increase in communal riots and a heightening of caste consolidation in the judiciary, bureaucracy and the police forces. What followed for the next thirty years, were a series of manufactured riots and conflagrations that left the nation reeling. No one was really held accountable.

The reason for this was simple: as observers have pointed out, most major parties, including the dominant Congress party which boasted quite a few right-wing warlords, participated in this organised blood-letting for political advantage and they used the storm troopers of the same shadowy outfit for their needs.⁴ What was not realised was that in this greed for short-term gains were the seeds of long-term disaster.

And, finally, there was only one ultimate winner to benefit from this manufactured cultural, social and religious divide.

Oh, but my concerns are not just about India. There are far larger and more dangerous forces lying in the shadows out there, unseen and unelected which play havoc in the lives of nations and peoples all over the

globe. They are answerable to no one as they silently manoeuvre strings that control the destinies of you and me.

Am I imagining all of this . . . is this another conspiracy theory? I don't think so. I believe we are living in a world where the present looms so disconcertingly large it leaves us little time for reflection. It seems that our memory span is getting shorter and what fills our information matrices so often is meaningless trivia. Is there a grand design behind all of this? For instance, what difference does it make to 99 per cent of the people of the world who has entered 'The Fortune 500 List'? Or which impossibly rich bidder paid a minor fortune for the works of a Leonardo da Vinci? Does this 'information' change your life or mine?

As Milan Kundera said: 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.'

A TALE

It was at the end of the fourteenth century that the army of the fearsome conqueror Timur the Lame, also known as Tamerlane by the terrified Christian kings of Europe, surrounded the city of Damascus and laid siege to it. The city rulers were petrified too. In fact, most of Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia feared this seemingly invincible man, who slaughtered indiscriminately in battle.

Kings who genuflected before Timur were spared if they agreed to part with a large part of their treasury and thereafter pay an annual tribute. When they didn't, there was complete devastation. The monarchs had heard the stories of how Timur had marched all the way from Samarkand into China and put the Chinese army to flight. And of how he had destroyed the empire of the Sultans of Hind and laid waste to their cities for a minor infringement; that he had marched into the lands of the Rus and extracted savage revenge for what he perceived was a slight. There were frightening accounts of how he had pillaged and devastated the empire of the Persians, Arabs and Seljuk Turks of Persia and Iraq.

Timur's huge empire stretched from Sinkiang in China, across Central Asia, northern India, through Persia, which included modern-day Afghanistan, parts of the southern regions of modern-day Russia, most of Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, parts of Kazakhstan and also the southern regions of Anatolia of modern-day Turkey. It was the biggest empire in the world then.

There is this famous quote that was attributed to him: 'There is only one God, and there is only one emperor—Timur.'

Now, after defeating the Mamluk emperor, Timur was at the doorway to the empire of Syria and Egypt. He had set camp just outside Damascus

and awaited a delegation from the city to negotiate terms and conditions. Would there be war or peace?

A delegation from Cairo was urgently sent to meet him. One of the members was Ibn Khaldun, the renowned scholar and historian. A few advisors in Timur's entourage had even read some of his works.

Timur sent for Ibn Khaldun.

It is said that the warrior and the scholar spent several days together talking in the royal tent. Ibn Khaldun talked to Timur about the political, social and economic conditions that led to the rise and fall of great empires. He spoke of the Egyptians and how the empire collapsed with the arrival of the Romans, and explained that another reason for its disintegration was that the society relied too heavily on slavery. He recounted the endless wars between the Greeks and Persians right up to the times of the Byzantine Empire in the eighth century CE and how these wars had exhausted both combatants. The stalemate had left a vacuum.

'What happens when a vacuum is created?' asked Ibn Khaldun.

Timur shrugged his shoulders.

Ibn Khaldun smiled and said: 'It is filled.'

Timur nodded thoughtfully. Ibn Khaldun told the now attentive Turk that, because of this power vacuum created between the exhausted Persians and Byzantines, a new power had surfaced to fill it. It was the emergence of the Arabs and Islam.

The scholar held forth on how and why the Mongol Empire collapsed. That empire was overstretched. It did not develop administrators among its own people and had to rely on the bureaucracy of conquered civilisations. This particular piece of history intrigued Timur the most because he claimed an ancestry that was linked to Genghiz Khan, the great warrior and founder of the Mongol dynasty.

But, beyond all of this, Ibn Khaldun also talked to Timur about the march of knowledge and how one civilisation passed on wisdom to the next. How different civilisations learnt from each other, and how the knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, music, chemistry, architecture and medicine grew. Timur, being a warrior and not a scholar, was amazed by all that he was hearing. His own advisors were like students before this towering intellectual.

Then, the scholar made one final point: Damascus, as a city, had the

scholars and libraries that had retained the memory from all these civilisations. There were hundreds of thousands of books from all over the Islamic empire that contained this wisdom. The city needed to be spared.

‘I know that you are a great conqueror, Sire,’ said Ibn Khaldun. ‘But when you sack a city of its libraries and books, you are doing a great disservice to future generations. The wisdom of the past, which has made us what we are today, will be lost forever. You are destroying the collective memory of the world.’

These heady conversations left Timur thinking. Some historians also claim that he returned to his capital of Samarqand with a vast library of books that contained the wisdom of the ages.

Ibn Khaldun went back to Egypt where he composed and completed his magnum opus titled *Al-Mukadimah*, which was a treatise on the rise and fall of great civilisations. Today, many scholars recognise it as the first scientific and modern work on the understanding and philosophy of history.

My own personal journey in trying to understand people and the world took place many centuries later in the city of Mumbai, specifically in and around the house where I was born and where I grew up. It was a strange, almost mythical space that all kinds of people inhabited and helped create a magical mural of which I was a part.

THE MANSION THAT FONSECA BUILT

Fonseca Mansion was built in 1938 and it was one of the early apartment buildings in Mahim, Mumbai. For its time, it was huge. It had four blocks, A, B, C and D, all joined together even though they had different staircases. Each block had eight apartments; two per floor. The houses were large and airy, built at a time when landlords respected the dignity of their tenants, even if they belonged to the middle class, and long before builders would charge for 1,000 square feet and actually give buyers 700 square feet to live in. This latter-day phenomenon would be called super-built up mathematics. The mansion had an added advantage too. It had a huge compound that was filled with mango, coconut, cherry, breadfruit, guava and chikoo trees that honed the skills of the children in the arts of poaching and the climbing of trees.

The apartments also boasted arguably the most motley and diverse group of people.

I believe this had to do with the times, which were a-changing rapidly; there was a sense of anxiety, hope and adventure in the air. There was a reason for it: a great war was on and, by 1945, it would be over. A colonial world and empire was crumbling and, by 1947, the British would leave India, and the country would be painfully and violently partitioned. There would be a sea of refugees heading in different directions, and the slaughter that followed on both sides is conservatively estimated to be about a million people. And yet, even in those desperate times, there were also dreams—some for a past that was rapidly disappearing, but many more for the possibilities of a better future.

Fonseca Mansion was witness to those times, and home to some of those dreams.

It was home to a film director who, just after his graduation in 1925, ran away from his family in Punjab to seek his future. With just Rs 21 in his pocket, he still had the confidence of a millionaire. From a poster painter, he turned lyricist, then writer and finally a film director of some consequence. In fact, by the age of forty, he was recognised by his peers as an auteur.

In his journey to a kind of stardom, the director lost his wife. Hearing rumours and reading the gossip columns in a host of film magazines about her husband's relationships with his leading ladies, she turned inward and away from him. Were those rumours true? I will never know, but for the wife, her world shrunk to her two children. For the next thirty-five years, until she died, she never exchanged a word with her husband. It was perhaps the longest 'maun vrat' in the history of vows of silence.

I knew it took a tremendous toll on the wife, and yet I came to respect the choice she made. I also know that those years of silence took a toll on the director too. It must have weighed heavily on a man who loved to talk, discuss ideas and who was also a great teller of tales. So, the director was left to tell his stories elsewhere. One place he found conducive was the home of his neighbour, a writer. They would spend hours in the evenings discussing films, literature and poetry.

The writer had come to the city in 1938. He didn't plan on being a writer. He had other, more grandiose ideas. A qualified and ambitious graduate, he wanted to be an entrepreneur in the city of entrepreneurs and great merchants. Initially, he did make a good start because he had a canny partner, a Jewish businessman from Hungary, who unfortunately left India after the end of the Second World War. But, by 1949, the writer was broke and back at square one. For a month he was in shock.

It was now that his wise and composed wife took over. She knew he could write well, so she told him that all he needed was to peddle a good story to a film producer and it would work. In fact, she also told him that when he was in this state of numbness, she had written the outline of a story herself. The future writer heard it and told his wife that it was too much of a tear-jerker and that this kind of maudlin stuff was not up his street. But his wife won the day. She convinced the future writer-cum-failed entrepreneur to polish the outline of the story, weave a web of fancy language around it and read it out to a film producer.

The strategy worked. The film was also a success. The future writer was surprised, but his wife was euphoric. They both happened to be my parents.

There was quite a film fraternity at Fonseca Mansion. There were two film distributors and their families who were refugees from Pakistan, which at one point had a flourishing film industry in Lahore. The duo, now uprooted and living in India, appeared to be in a desperate hurry to cut deals, hit the jackpot and make a new beginning. Somehow, the big deal always seemed just beyond striking distance. They were short on education and contacts, but strong on effort and enterprise, and they slogged and they sweated. One could see them, even late at night, discussing possibilities, comparing notes, pooling in limited resources in potential deals . . . hoping. They never quite made it, but they made sure their children got a decent education. The children would make it—as engineers, doctors and businessmen. They would have nothing to do with films.

Below the writer's first-floor home lived a joint family of two brothers. Neighbours noted their extreme politeness of manner and the quietness of their house. No one had ever heard a raised voice emanating from it. It was incredible. How could a joint family of two brothers, their mother, their wives, and a total of four children be so silent?

The brothers also had another quiet passion. They had a business of information and educational films, and had, over the years, built up a vast library of short films and documentaries from all over the world, which went to schools and colleges in all parts of the country. The films were on science, medicine, maths, biology, agriculture, dams and such.

The writer who lived above them joked that their business was part of the government's Five-Year Plans. Yes, said the brothers. They were building a scientific temper in the country. That's what the Constitution of the new and free India said, and that's what they were going to do. They were two men who were very seriously attempting to spread the light of science and knowledge through the darkness of mindless ritual and ignorance. They were two businessmen who believed in a sovereign, socialist, democratic republic of India.

Considering where we stand today, they did not reach enough minds, but I laud their effort.

In another apartment of Fonseca Mansion lived a famous science professor and his family that comprised his wife and two children. He was a wizard, it was said, and there was a constant flow of students to his home seeking tuitions. But, as with all wizards, he had a fatal flaw. He was a strict disciplinarian, who would actually whack his children with a cane when they did something wrong, or did something he felt was wrong. Very often the wife would try to intervene to stop the beatings and often she would succeed. Unfortunately, over time, the whacking finally spread to her too as she tried to defend the children.

This led to disastrous consequences.

One fine day, while the professor was at the University, she packed her bags, kissed her two children goodbye and left for her parents' home in the Punjab. After her departure, the professor was a broken man. He tried his best to persuade his wife to return but it didn't work out. Realising the consequences of his actions he desperately tried to reach out to his children by being extra attentive to them and their needs. Did it work? I am not so sure.

There were three doctors living in Fonseca Mansion too. One was a lady, unmarried. Rumours abounded on why she remained a spinster. Some said maybe no self-respecting man wanted a wife who was smarter than him. Or perhaps she never found the time to locate a husband, or it could be that she preferred being alone, or maybe she was short-tempered and cantankerous. No one will know. Later, someone spread a rumour that there was once a man in her life; unfortunately, he was married.

The second doctor was a very elderly, scholarly man with a wife and a middle-aged son, who was an engineer. The son married a doctor and they had three children, two boys and a girl. They were Bene Israeli Jews. It is said that they were one of the lost tribes of Israel that had arrived in India before the end of the first century CE. What amazed the other residents at Fonseca Mansion was that this family could trace its history from such a while ago.

The doctor and his family lived above the writer, across the stairway from the film director and below the apartment of an ageing screen actor who had married a beautiful, also ageing actress. This celluloid Muslim couple had two children, and the wife had a teenage son from an earlier marriage and they all lived happily ever after. The ageing screen actor also

had a wonderful voice that could be heard some distance away, especially as he settled down to a few drinks in the evenings.

The doctor and his family living below found it very difficult to sleep when they heard the booming voice from above. Sometimes the doctor would request his neighbour to keep the volume down, only to be answered with an even higher decibel level. And yet, in the morning, there would be apologies all around: the noise-maker would apologise for the noise, and complainant would apologise for the complaint.

The third doctor, a Zoroastrian, was a busy man, rarely seen. His wife was a piano teacher who had five incredibly faithful students who kept her completely occupied during the week. The piano teacher also sang operas and often one could hear her singing in the late evening, if one happened to pass by her apartment. Not used to operas and opera singing, some of the neighbours politely sniggered. Passers-by on the road would go into hysterics. It was a clash of civilisations.

Then there was the family of three sons and no parents. The elderly parents were away in north India, fighting in court for some inheritance rights. The case took years to resolve. So, the sons had plenty of time to party with friends, maids and even passers-by. And they did. They were a boisterous gang. Two brothers carried on in the same spirit into their later lives with disastrous consequences. One became an alcoholic; the other suffered from dementia. Advice to parents: try to spend more time with your children.

Two apartments away, at the same level, but in another block, lived a classical dancer and her percussionist, an elderly tabla player. There were whispers that he was her father. The lady had beautiful eyes and a sensuous body, and by 7 in the morning, her entourage of two musicians and a singer would arrive. By 7.30 a.m., she would start her practice of thumping the floor with her feet and spend three hours at it. After the strenuous practice session, it was said that she was massaged in oil and then she would have a bath and then rest for the day. By 7 p.m., she would be ready to receive any admirers who arrived. They were all kinds of people who came, some leaving as late as 2 a.m. And yet, she was up again the next morning, thumping the floor with renewed vigour. Her stamina was legendary.

Just below the dancer lived a retired companion to a maharaja, who

hennaed her hair. How she managed to survive all the exuberance from above nobody knew. She always wore slacks and a matching top and there was an eerie calm about her as she walked her dog in the evening. It was as if she were gliding on air with her gaze fixed on some distant object. Once in a while, her attention shifted to acknowledge the presence of an elderly gentleman walking on the pavement in a three-piece suit, or the wife of the writer on her balcony. That was all. She spoke to no one.

But a few people knew she had a friend. He was a little boy, a neighbour who came over after school, who listened to her tales over a glass of sherbet and biscuits. She told him stories of days gone by, of pomp and pageantry, of royalty and honour, of nawabs and maharajas and British aristocracy. The boy loved those stories.

The boy's father, a refugee from Pakistan, was a Sindhi businessman with links with Hong Kong and Macao. Later, he would send his son to expand the business to Vietnam, Nigeria and the Middle East. In Vietnam, the boy got a first-hand experience of war and slaughter. In Nigeria, he was in the middle of a bloody civil strife. With these distractions, he messed things up. The boy was shunted around to see where he could fit in but it seemed he had no stomach for trade.

The father, worried, set up a trust fund for the boy. Much later, the family's business would be wiped out in a scam, and the boy, now a middle-aged man of fifty, would be left penniless. Somehow, it did not matter to him. He would recall those wondrous stories of the lady with the hennaed red hair. In 2011, he met a tragic and lonely end as he died of a heart attack on the streets of Moradabad. He was trying to start a business of exporting metal crafts to Dubai.

There was another family of Sindhi refugees: a retired judge, his son and daughter-in-law, and their two little children. Every day, the judge would take a walk in his three-piece suit. He would nod to the lady with hennaed red hair as she walked her dogs, survey the street for a while and then head back home. Perhaps he was trying to come to terms with his new surroundings. The man had been an eminent judge of Sindh, now part of Pakistan, and the division of India had forced him to migrate. He was now in a strange land and he found it difficult to understand why he was in Fonseca Mansion.

His son, a quiet, erudite man, tried to make something of his new life.

He fathered one more child and became a manager of a company in Calcutta. He moved on to Tokyo where the company had an office and spent years and years there. Later, he moved back to Calcutta, where he invested almost everything he earned into an enterprise of his own. When the enterprise failed, he returned to Bombay quietly. By this time, he was also blind. It was his wife who carried on the struggle while he was away. With the money she received from him, she invested wisely. With the returns she invested some more. She even let out a room to add to her income. When her husband returned, she was ready for him. Her tenants had left and there was no talk of failure, just a steely determination to get on with life. Their house became my second home at Fonseca Mansion.

As I reflect upon the amount of time I spent with them, the meals and conversations that I shared, the comfort I felt there, I never sensed that I belonged to a Muslim family, or that my hosts had been uprooted from their ancestral homes in the land called Sindh because they happened to be Hindus. I was always warmly welcomed. When I first met this refugee family, I was too young to understand the horrors of Partition, but as the years passed, I began to comprehend the underlying pain in their lives. Yet, not once did this pain interfere in the friendship between this family and mine.

What follows next, however, is another memory that is also linked to the Partition, one that tells another kind of story.

A MEMORY OF PAIN

It was Eid, and my mother as usual sent sweets and snacks and home-made kheer to our neighbours. It was the normal practice at Fonseca Mansion on festive days—every community exchanged gifts. This time, however, it was different. Our elderly Punjabi neighbour, in the apartment across the staircase from us, came to our home and returned the kheer. He sheepishly informed us that his mother had recently arrived from Punjab and when she was told that we were Muslims she refused to eat it.

At that time, I was confused. I still remember my elder sister's anger as she said, 'Why did they have to return it? Couldn't they have thrown it into the garbage?'

Today, as I reflect upon the incident, many thoughts cross my mind. The first, of course, was that I was suddenly made aware that my family was different from the others. And yet, how could I blame that elderly woman? She was a casualty of the Partition, and she carried that scar of separation from her roots till the day she died a few months later.

MORE STORIES FROM FONSECA MANSION

Just above the apartment of the spinster doctor lived a brother and three sisters. No one knows where they came from . . . were they refugees too? Was their surname really their surname? Were they really a brother and three sisters? The tongues kept wagging. The sisters were, it was whispered, you know what, and the brother was, you know what. And yet, the tenants at Fonseca Mansion let them be and minded their own business.

Every evening, the brother and three sisters would emerge all dressed up, and get into their tiny car and drive off, only to return late at night. No one really talked to them, or they to anyone. It was a silent mutual agreement. Many years later, I found out that the family had sold their car. The brother would emerge for an occasional outing to buy groceries and vegetables. The sisters stayed at home and were barely seen. And one by one they died. No one went to their funerals. In 2003, the youngest sister passed away, and the tenant she kept to earn a little extra money usurped the apartment.

A retired Maratha Army officer had also made his home in the apartment. A tall, swarthy man, he had a temper that erupted every two months or so, and then even his two grown-up sons were mortally afraid of him. They would disappear for hours as he ranted and raged. It was his wife who faced him head-on. There would be screams and shouts as the neighbours listened. Then there would be silence. Finally, the wife would emerge on her balcony smiling. The neighbours would heave a sigh of relief and the sons would slink back home in the night.

Much later, it was revealed that the officer had a piece of shrapnel in his head. It was a gift for serving in the British army on the North African

front in the Second World War. The Maratha officer died in 1962.

Then there was the retired bank manager who lived on the ground floor of a block and was a bachelor. On the day after he retired, he decided to feed the three stray dogs that lived nearby. He set up a spot outside his front door. After he fed them, he had his help clean up the mess. The bank manager must have liked what he did because he did that the next day . . . and the next day too. Soon, it became a habit.

At first, everything seemed fine as the residents of the block found it 'very cute'. But as days and months went by, the dogs became a nuisance as they snarled at each other at lunch-time, or when they scared the dog of the lady with the hennaed hair, or just generally misbehaved with the other residents of the block. The residents ganged up and asked the man to take the dogs into his home or else. The man said he couldn't because he was a Brahmin and he couldn't have the dogs shitting and pissing all over his home. As the debates got fiercer, the manager tried desperately to bring the boisterous trio to heel, but to no avail. Finally, somebody called the municipality and a dog van pulled up. Three catchers with a large net emerged and trapped the dogs in the passageway and hauled them out.

A lot of residents watched as the van drove away. So did the manager standing on the street. He had tried to intervene in the operation, but was brushed aside. The residents noted that he stood on the road for a long time and then entered his home.

Later, a small delegation went to his home to console him, and they reported to the rest of the residents that the retired bank manager had cried and cried, but he finally recovered and thanked his neighbours for their concern.

A week later, a strange thing happened. The retired bank manager brought home a pup from an adoption agency . . . and he took it right in. Many of his neighbours smiled in relief, especially the lady with the hennaed hair.

How can I forget the rebel? Ever since he was a young boy (he was about three years younger than me) I realised that I was dealing with a kid who was different. Though he belonged to a family of teachers he somehow had a disdain for formal education but had a fascination for building things with his hands: with wood and with scrap metal. For years he carved and he sculpted with passion. Often, other kids from Fonseca

Mansion would join him in an enterprise and then depart. But he went on. Once, furiously working on weekends and ably assisted by a couple of other kids from Fonseca Mansion, he actually built a rowing boat and two paddles. It took six weekends to complete the job and the rest of the residents were amazed by how focused the kids were. What amazed the residents further was that the three twelve-year-olds actually decided to carry the boat on their heads to Mahim Creek to check if their creation worked. It was a sight to see as they walked down the road that Sunday, accompanied by four young adults who waved to the families standing in their balconies. They got a hero's send-off from all of us. When they returned the residents heard the bad news. The boat just sank into the water and refused to float.

Nevertheless my protagonist went ahead with his dreams by finally joining the Merchant navy. He travelled the oceans for years and years and in the process of his odyssey he accumulated a fine collection of subversive political literature, poetry and music from around the world.

Finally, I must reveal another strange set of residents. I say strange because, as our country was emerging from colonial rule and trying to shape a future, here was group of five Anglo-Indian families who were waiting to collect their benefits and ship out and leave. The men worked for the Railways, the Post and Telegraph Department and the Water Works Department. Some of their wives worked too. One was a nurse, one a teacher in a school, the third a secretary in a pharmaceutical company.

In the initial stages, the Anglo-Indians were viewed as being different from the other residents at Fonseca Mansion. On holidays, their men and women played badminton together, which seemed strange and a bit outrageous to the others. The women wore skirts and blouses, sang strange songs, and spoke a quaint mixture of Hindi and English when they wanted to communicate with their neighbours. The other residents would, on occasion, privately imitate this hybrid language and there would be guffaws.

There were other differences too. On Saturday nights, the men and women dressed up in suits and fancy dresses and went to parties and dances at the Railway Club. They returned late at night, and it was abundantly clear that they had had a wonderful time as they laughed and

hummed a few ditties as they entered their homes.

The divide was soon breached when the children at Fonseca Mansion began to play together, became friends and visited each other in their homes. The real breakthrough occurred when the wife of the writer and the daughter-in-law of the gentleman in the three-piece suit joined the Anglo-Indians in a game of badminton. It was a mix of pants and shirts, skirts and blouses and sarees and shalwar-kameezes. The rest of the residents watched wide-eyed. Then, it happened again and then again.

It didn't take long for other residents to participate in the games too: men, women and occasionally their children too. There was lots of laughter, a few squabbles and a great deal of camaraderie.

By then, unfortunately, it was time for the Anglo-Indians to leave. They would go to New Zealand or England or Australia. It was strange watching them depart from a land their fathers, grandfathers and even great grandfathers had called home. I have often wondered what it was that drove them to depart . . . I still haven't figured it out.

The emigration began around 1960 and, by 1962, they had all left. It was like seeing a slow dissolve leading to a fade out. When they left, there was a deep sense of loss on all sides. We parted as friends. Some of these friendships have lasted to this day.

These are a few of the memories from my childhood in Mumbai that helped shaped me in some measure. But another and more important journey was to begin, one wrought by an event that had occurred very far from my home, and many, many years ago.

It took a war to launch the age of questioning.

A DAY OF RECKONING

It is April 2016, and I stand in a small, cleared hamlet before a stone installation and sculpture that is on a raised manicured platform of green shrubs and plants. It shows a woman standing, cradling a dead child on her left arm as her right arm stretches skywards, ending in a clenched fist.

I stare at her face. Her head is slightly raised and she is staring straight ahead, almost as if she is looking at a distant object disappearing in the sky. Was that distant object a retreating helicopter gunship? Her face reveals a silent, deep sorrow, but it also reveals a quiet determination to fight on. On the ground around her are other images of people mourning their dead: their children, their wives, their husbands, their sons and daughters, their grandparents.

As I stand there, I recall another, earlier attempt at chronicling the horrors of war: the incredibly sophisticated and powerful painting by Pablo Picasso of the aerial slaughter of civilians in the village of Guernica by the fascists during the Spanish Civil War. A full-size tapestry replica was quickly installed in the new United Nations building in New York.

There was a reason for it.

The Second World War was over and the new world powers believed that the painting served the noble cause of reminding top diplomats, politicians, bureaucrats and the powerful of the world to renounce war as a means to resolve conflicts. In fact, the United Nations was created for just that purpose. Unfortunately, I don't think the nobility of purpose has borne fruit, but the painting does serve as a very powerful and sophisticated image of pain.

The piece of sculpture I stand before now does not have that kind of sophistication. But it doesn't matter. What it has going for it is a memory

that will tell ordinary citizens around the world that here, in this land, were an extraordinary people, both men and women, mostly peasants, who had the will and determination to fight against almost impossible odds and defeat the mightiest country in the world. They won in the year 1975.

Now try and guess where I am.

I am in Vietnam.

I am in a tiny hamlet about 35 kilometres off the National Highway, almost midway between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In front of me is a small, cleared area of palm trees and canals running through gentle fields that used to be villages.

On one day, in 1968, the homes of the farmers who lived there were destroyed, and more than 600 men, women and children, all of them civilians, were ruthlessly murdered and mutilated by American soldiers. They arrived by land and by helicopter gunships, and conducted a ghastly orgy of violence that became known around the world as the Mai Lai massacre.

The massacre itself was a very tiny fraction of a much larger global memory called the Vietnam War. Yet, it was significant. It was one of the images that further galvanised world public opinion against the war, accelerating the marches of anti-war activists in cities across Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, Canada, Australia and even the US. Millions of people began to question the reasons for this war and demanded answers.

The war was almost surreal.

It began with a small trickle of CIA operatives and military advisors who stealthily entered South Vietnam to help the American-backed government. It slowly morphed into a full-blown war. In the final years the Americans used everything in their arsenal—missiles, smart bombs, chemical weapons such as napalm and Agent Orange, helicopter gunships, heavy artillery, tanks, aircraft carriers, B-52 bombers, fighter jets, half a million American troops, strong contingents from Australia and South Korea and even a million-strong South Vietnamese army—and it all came to naught.

The only weapons not used were the nuclear ones because luckily some sense prevailed in Washington.

It is said that the tonnage of bombs dropped on this small country,

specifically South Vietnam with occasional sorties to the North, was more than all the bombs dropped by combatants in the First and Second World Wars. It was also revealed by a cynical statistician that the bombs dropped around the Seventeenth Parallel, the line dividing North and South Vietnam, worked out to about nine tonnes of bombs per person in the region. Even the statistic was surreal.

Could this be true?

Opposing this immense and modern war machine were guerrilla fighters, men and women called the Viet Cong, who were logistically supported by North Vietnamese regular troops. The Viet Cong had built deep underground tunnels where they lived and from which they would suddenly emerge to fight, lay booby-traps and quickly re-enter and disappear. The tunnels also served as field hospitals. It was classic guerrilla warfare. Later, as the tide of war turned in their favour, the Viet Cong would emerge from their underground bunkers and fight in the open with antiquated rifles and ageing anti-aircraft guns and tanks and take the enemy head-on.

By 1975, the American army had frantically and pathetically fled along with their allies, leaving more than three million Vietnamese dead and many more millions wounded, so many of them grievously. More than two-thirds of the casualties were civilians.

It was perhaps one of the most senseless and brutal wars fought in the history of mankind.

It was senseless because some influential planners and thinkers in the West, mostly in the US, believed in the 'Domino Theory'. The theory, in its incredible stupidity, believed that if Viet Cong nationalism succeeded, then other nations in the neighbourhood, and perhaps around the world, would follow suit and fall prey to the disease called communism. There were so many incredible tragedies that this theory was responsible for: in Asia, Africa, in Latin America.

Vietnam was one such tragedy.

I now walk along the narrow pathways between the fields of Mai Lai and come upon a flowing canal. I open a small box that contains the ashes of my friend Ray Fischer. He had died and was cremated about three years earlier, and his wife Barbara had brought along the box with his ashes.

Ray was a conscientious objector to this senseless war, refusing to

join the American army in a fit of patriotic fervour and kill people thousands of miles away from his native New York City. I still remember the endless debates that I had with him as we discussed the reasons for this war and its consequences around the world. Ray had always believed that, though this war was an incredible tragedy for the people of Vietnam, for the rest of the world it had launched the age of questioning.

‘Some good has emerged out of this shitty mess,’ he had said.

I gently spread his ashes into the canal and whispered, ‘You are in Vietnam as a friend, Ray.’

I enter the small museum adjacent to the sculpture. It is a concrete structure with several rooms. The museum is full of images of the war, and from around the world where millions upon millions had marched against the conflict. There are images of the carnage at Mai Lai and the American retreat at Khe Sanh. There are tributes paid by the Vietnamese to the people from around the world who stood in solidarity alongside them in their hour of need.

There are also images of some of the commanders who ordered other massacres besides the one at Mai Lai. One of them intrigued me. It was of a Commander Kerrey who passed off as a war hero, got elected to the Senate and was finally discovered to be a mass murderer in the early years of this century. The Vietnam War has so many secrets waiting to be revealed.

I finally see the photograph of the incredibly courageous American soldier who spilled the beans of what happened at Mai Lai. It was a story that slipped through the tight net of information control and reached people all over the globe.

Just then, I hear a voice from behind me asking me in English, ‘Where are you from?’

I turn to see an elderly Vietnamese man looking at me. We both smile at each other as I answer, ‘I’m from India.’

‘What brings you here . . . very few outsiders come here.’

‘I was brought up on this war and I came to pay my respects to the people who died . . .’

The man looked at me solemnly and nodded.

‘Thank you for coming. Do you know that there were many more massacres besides this one?’

I nodded.

He looked at me silently for a while and then whispered, 'We forgive, but we will never forget.'

'I hope the world will never forget.'

The man smiled.

I walked out of the museum to join my wife Jennifer and our friends Barbara and Vickram who were waiting outside. Barbara hadn't emerged from the tourist vehicle since we arrived at Mai Lai. She said that being an American and knowing what her country had done here, she didn't have the strength or courage to see what lay in store.

As we all drove off, a thought occurred to me: what took me so long to come to this country? Vietnam had been at the centre of my political and philosophical journey. This was the war that had forced me to question, to probe and to seek answers about a world that was rapidly evolving.

And in that journey was a young man, about twenty-two years old, who had set me thinking.

A REAL CHAMP IS BORN

It was the year 1960. At the Rome Olympics, a young boxer from the US won the gold medal in the light-heavyweight category. However, he wasn't the usual kind of boxer. He was a loud-mouthed African American brat who talked a mile a minute and recited a strange kind of poetry that had only one purpose: to promote himself as the greatest boxer the world had ever seen. Nevertheless, back in his country, he was received as a hero and soon became the darling of the press and the people of the land. His outrageous self-promoting quotable quotes, were backed up by lightning-fast moves and an incredible talent that helped him win match after match in the ring.

His name was Cassius Clay and, by 1964, at the age of twenty-two, he was the world heavyweight boxing champion. The world had never quite seen a sportsperson like him. One of his memorable lines was: 'I'm so mean I make medicines sick.'

A few months after being anointed World Champion, Clay announced that he was changing his name to Cassius X because his surname was a slave name. As an African American, he now rejected that surname. There was a bit of surprise, and perhaps anger, in the country, but the liberals and left-wingers applauded his decision. Cassius X, they said, was making a point.

For the citizens who were disturbed, there was also the suspicion that he had come under the influence of Malcolm X, the fiery African American who was leading a revolt and fighting for the rights of his 'subjected' people. Malcolm X was both a loved and feared figure because of what he stood for, and Cassius had become a friend of his.

Yes, Cassius was a friend of Malcolm X, but he was also his own

man.

He proved it a few months later by making another announcement that now sounded like a volcanic explosion to many Americans and to the world at large. Cassius X said he had become a member of the Nation of Islam and had changed his name once more. He would henceforth be known as Muhammad Ali and 'he would float like a butterfly and sting like a bee'.

He was just twenty-three years old.

Many Americans were now outraged. How could he renounce his name and religion after being showered with so much affection, love and respect? Then came the final straw.

The US was about to enter the war in Vietnam, and Ali refused to be drafted into the army because he said his religion was one of peace and not violence. He even flunked his entrance test for the army, and when a reporter asked him how that happened, he answered, 'I said I'm the greatest, I didn't say smartest.' That did get a few laughs, but this twenty-four-year-old was now being seen in another kind of light. He began to be booed by the crowds and people started to question his patriotism. The loveable brat was now viewed as a conceited and dubious hero.

At just twenty-four years of age, he was laying his life and his future on the line.

I was thoroughly impressed.

Two years went by, and Ali began to pay a heavy price for not toeing a line that could easily have set things right. All he had to do was join the army, get a desk job somewhere and everything would be fine. He wouldn't even have to go to Vietnam if he did some kind of social work in the US instead. It would have been so easy.

Ali still refused to join the army saying he believed in peace.

In 1967, he was stripped of his title by the Justice Department for an act of felony and expelled from fighting in the ring and earning a living. Many Americans applauded the state's action and felt that this loudmouth had finally been taught a lesson. Ali continued to be an anti-war activist and a conscientious objector. He added one more line to his famous repertoire of quotes: 'I ain't got nothing against the Viet Cong, and they never called me a nigger.'

Ali, who was born and brought up in the strictly segregated state of

Kentucky, had felt the full force of the humiliation of being of black in a state that was politically, economically and socially ruled by whites. He was willing to use his position as a sports hero and a world champion to express his anger at this state of affairs. Why should he fight, and perhaps die, in an unjust war thousands of miles away when there was so much inequality in his own country?

In 1970, the Supreme Court of America overturned the ruling of the Justice Department and Muhammad Ali finally got back to the ring and went on to win the title of World Champion once again, to lose it and then win it once more. By this time the anti-war movement had grown so large in the US and around the world that Muhammad Ali became the most important and respected sportsperson on the planet.

He became a legend.

When he died in 2016, he had an inclusive funeral. There were priests from all religions who recited their prayers and an entire world mourned the passing of a great man, a sports hero and a life-long activist against injustice.

MY OWN VIETNAM

Vietnam had first entered my consciousness when I was about ten years old. It was a memory around which so much of my life revolved. Let me explain.

‘Dien Bien Phu,’ my father had muttered.

It was 1954 and he was reading the morning newspaper in the veranda of our home.

‘What’s that?’ I asked.

‘It’s a small place in a country called Vietnam.’

‘What happened there?’

‘It seems that the French army has been defeated by the Vietnamese and has surrendered.’

‘What were the French doing there?’

‘Exactly what the British were doing here . . . they were ruling Vietnam . . . and now they’ve been kicked out.’

‘Who was the leader of the Vietnamese people?’

‘A man called Ho Chi Minh.’

My father seemed pleased and I was elated. He had told me stories about our own Independence and how we had subtly forced the British to leave India. He had explained to me the political moves of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Sardar Patel and the Congress party, and also about the idea of non-violence. It was an idea that the British didn’t know how to deal with.

But this piece of news from Vietnam was different.

I had always believed that the reason the British finally left India was because they were exhausted from fighting the Second World War, and also because of sympathetic international public opinion for the Indian

cause. Gandhi's non-violent approach had captured the world's imagination. I also believed that, despite the British departure, everything else remained the same.

The Western perception of seeing itself as a superior civilisation that was destined to rule the rest of the world had not really changed. It still believed that the rest of the world had to be taught, moulded and finally civilised. And that it was the duty of the West to do so: benignly or by other means. What was left unsaid was that, in the civilising process, the control of the world's resources was up for plunder.

The people of Vietnam had changed all of that. It was the beginning of an avalanche that was to follow, and I as a young boy was going to follow that momentum.

My world was suddenly filled with other changes that had far-reaching consequences. It began with the overthrow of the King of Egypt, who was backed by imperial powers, by the nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser. I heard about the Korean War where the country was divided, and about Sukarno's liberation movement that overthrew Dutch rule in Indonesia. I applauded the spontaneous uprising of the Algerian people against French colonialism. The French were forced to hold a referendum in Algeria and the results were overwhelmingly in favour of freedom. New heroes emerged, such as Ben Bella and Houari Boumédiène. I learned about revolutionary movements in other parts of Africa: in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, in the Congo with Patrice Lumumba, in Angola, in Guinea Bissau, in Mozambique, in Zimbabwe, in Tanzania, in Kenya, in Nigeria.

The colonised world was finally waking up.

I celebrated the overthrow of the Libyan King by a young and dynamic army officer called Muammar Gaddafi. The officer had led the revolt because he believed that the wealth created by the sale of the country's oil belonged to his people, not big international oil corporations. He went a step further and closed down the American base stationed in Libya and made British and Italian interests more accountable to his country. I still remember the image of this dashing young officer that appeared in the *Times of India* so many years ago.

But I must make a digression here and go into the future.

Much later, in the year 2011, Gaddafi was overthrown by NATO

forces and a sponsored Libyan opposition, and brutally murdered by tutored assassins. Did I say 'tutored'? Months and years before all of this happened, the Western press and their political leaders had begun to call him a 'madman', 'a supporter of terrorist organisations' and 'a ruthless dictator'. It was standard practice by the politicians and the free press of the free world: you demonise your target before you overthrow him.

When the job of murdering him was done, I saw a video clip of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton broadly smiling as she exclaimed triumphantly, 'We came, we saw and he died!'

Then she smirked in celebration.

Did this lady even understand anything about the man she had helped overthrow?

I am absolutely sure Madam Hillary was brought up on the standard diet of US intelligence reports about the 'good guys' and 'bad guys'—euphemisms for those who collaborated and genuflected to US power and interests and those who tried to retain a semblance of dignity and independence. She was also brought up on the opinion of quacks masquerading as 'experts' on Middle East affairs, and perhaps her own views were carefully calibrated by 'Saudi- and Zionist-financed' views about Muammar's role in the region.

But who exactly was this man?

WHO WAS MUAMMAR GADDAFI?

According to the mainstream media coverage that he received from the West throughout his life as a leader, Muammar Gaddafi was a ruthless dictator, a madman, a supporter of terrorists and a lot of other things. Since I have been brought up to question such media bias, let me present to the reader an alternative image of a leader who cannot, and should not, be so easily dismissed in the annals of history.

Muammar was a man from a poor Bedouin family who joined the army, trained in the Libyan Military Academy as an officer and was soon promoted to the rank of a colonel. Muammar was also, unlike other young officers, a thinking young man who had seen and heard about the humiliation brought upon the Arab and Berber people, first by the Ottoman Turks and later by the Europeans before and after the end of the First World War. He also had a deep interest in history, and came to realise that the great economic and political decline that had occurred across the Middle East was because of centuries of factionalism, competing tribal loyalties and European machinations, all of which had played a devastating role in the region. A once proud and generous people had been reduced to a state of abject subjugation.

Muammar decided to change this narrative and, almost single-handedly, write a fresh one. He refused to remain the typical Arab or tribal leader whose interests remained within the clan, tribe or nation. He had much larger and grandiose ideas of a united Berber, black African and Arab confederation that could provide some semblance of an opposition to the imperial onslaught in the oil- and resource-rich region. One of the first steps Muammar initiated was to form an anti-imperialist front. As soon as he overthrew the Western-backed King Idris from power, he nationalised

the oil industry, closed down the American airbase, reviewed British interests and, most importantly, became an enthusiastic supporter of the United Arab Republic that attempted to fuse together the nations of Libya, Egypt and Syria. It was a kind of nationalist and secular counter-weight to the imposed presence of Israel and the Western-backed monarchies in the region.

The Arab friendship collapsed with the arrival of Anwar Sadat of Egypt. The move to disengage this 'toxic' union was deftly manipulated and the message from the imperial powers was clear: the confederation of three secular and nationalist countries would not be tolerated. The West and Israel were much more comfortable dealing with fragile monarchies and tribal chieftains. In any case, the formation of independent thinking in an area where a lot of oil, uranium and natural gas was at stake could only be considered dangerous.

A disappointed Muammar, unable to form a pan-Arab and Berber confederacy, turned his gaze towards the continent of Africa. On the international front, he lent support to the liberation movements that were occurring on the continent of Africa: in South Africa, Angola, Namibia, Mauritania and elsewhere. He backed the IRA in its war against England. All of this again did not win him any friends in the West, where he was branded as being 'mercurial' and 'unstable'—and, of course, a 'supporter of terrorists'.

This 'terrorist' tag was also backed by a very serious charge. After the bombing of a Pan Am flight that crashed at Lockerbie in 1988, killing about 300 people, there was worldwide outrage. Whispers about Libyan involvement began to circulate. Gaddafi firmly denied any involvement, but an investigation by Scottish police and the FBI arrived at a different conclusion. Two senior officials of the Libyan Government were charged with carrying out this horrendous crime, and one of them, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi, was convicted. Following this judgement crippling sanctions were imposed upon the country. In fact, the American government went further to claim that these two men were just pawns and that the actual orders came from Gaddafi himself. It was an open and shut case.

Was it?

The first objection came from Hans Köchler a United Nations observer covering the trial. When the judgement was announced he called

it ‘a spectacular miscarriage of justice’. Another observer at the trial was Dr Jim Swire, who had lost his daughter in the attack. He was convinced that Megrahi was wrongly convicted. The judgement itself stated that the evidence of a key witness, Edwin Bollier, was ‘inconsistent’ and ‘self-contradictory’ and other witnesses had ‘openly lied to the court’. Hans Köchler went on to claim that Edwin Bollier had personally told him that he had been offered 4 million dollars for evidence that would implicate Libya.

A quote from an article by James Cusick in *The Independent* on 16 December 2013 sums it up: ‘Despite a mountain of evidence and a supposedly groundbreaking Scottish trial on “neutral” territory in the Netherlands before learned judges, Lockerbie remains a byword for state silence on evidential inconsistencies, surrounded by dark, covert diplomatic games.’

The New York Times had always held the state of Libya and the only Libyan convicted, Mr Megrahi, as the unquestionable criminals of the Lockerbie bombings. Then a strange thing happened.

When ‘bad guy’ Mr Megrahi died of cancer in 2012 in Libya, an obituary written by Robert McFadden appeared in *The New York Times* that said: ‘The enigmatic Mr Megrahi had been the central figure of the case for decades, reviled as a terrorist but defended by many Libyans, and even some world leaders, as a victim of injustice whose trial, 12 years after the bombing, had been riddled with political overtones, memory gaps and flawed evidence.’

Crazy, isn’t it?

There is now enough alternative evidence to suggest that the whole trial and conviction was a frame-up. One key witness has now admitted that he lied. Another witness was found to have been manoeuvred into a false identification, and an Al-Jazeera investigative report sharply contradicted the evidence of the prosecution.

But it was too late and the damage was done.

What remained in people’s memories were the screaming newspaper headlines and television reportage that pointed those accusing fingers at Muammar Gaddafi. The alternative evidence that came in years later was buried in the back pages of the press and forgotten.

The question that really needs to be asked is whether Muammar

Gaddafi was a democrat.

Although I will not judge him by the standards of the West, I do believe that Muammar Gaddafi had, by the end of his tenure, lost the plot. The odds were stacked against him: Saudi, Israeli and Western powers along with crippling sanctions were too much. Then there were the sponsored attempts to overthrow him. To keep all these manoeuvres from overwhelming his vision for Libya, he resorted to measures that did not endear him to quite a few of his own citizens. He clamped down hard on dissent in his country and he was left without many influential friends among the leaders in his neighbourhood and in the Western world.

But.

When I read the coarse and dismissive opinions that were unleashed by the mass media in the 'free' world after his murder, I was astonished. There was not a mention of what this man had achieved for the people of his own country and the kind of democracy that he had wanted to create.

What had he achieved?

It was for the first time that an Arab leader had created a manifesto for governance—a combination of democracy, socialism and Islam. He went on to forge a kind of unity between the Berbers, Arabs and African tribes and in this effort he had to battle entrenched feudal and tribal power structures that had existed for centuries. As a form of direct democracy, he started to promote local and elected committees to administer local and regional affairs. A large part of the wealth that the country earned through the sale of oil went into creating educational, engineering and medical institutions for both young men and women. Gender equality was given the highest priority in Libya, and this was unique in the Arab world. A very large part of his country's oil wealth was used to build a large and intricate underground pipeline that could tap the enormous water reserves of the desert. This helped create hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile and arable land in Libya. Scholarships for deserving students to study at universities abroad were readily available, and housing, healthcare and education within the country was absolutely free or heavily subsidised. Despite the crippling sanctions imposed on his country between 1980 and 2003, Libya had the highest Human Development Index in all of Africa up to the year 2011.

That was the year when he was overthrown.

But all of this doesn't matter.

Muammar Gaddafi had been branded a dictator by the imperial powers, and there was nothing he could do to wipe that stain away. 'Democratic' countries were on the rampage across the world, but then, they were 'democratic' and therefore their actions acceptable. Their slaughter and mayhem was valid, because they were fighting for 'freedom', and their cause was holy. Besides, there was very little mention of the sponsored coups against him, nor any references to the targeted assassination attempts on his life. One such attempt destroyed his home in Tripoli, killed a few of his retainers and took the life of his daughter. To the mainstream media of the West the deaths of the retainers and his daughter were 'collateral damage' in the fight against a 'despot' and therefore could be shrugged off.

This has been the standard practice when targeting leaders who refuse to toe the line imposed by imperial powers ever since I can remember. The classic example is that of Margaret Thatcher, who, as late as 1985, believed that Nelson Mandela was a 'terrorist'.

This kind of history is important to recall . . . but it also makes me sick.

It is telling that one of the first leaders that Nelson Mandela visited after being made president of South Africa was Muammar Gaddafi. He went to say thank you to a friend who had helped his country when it needed that help the most.

I apologise for this major digression. I must get on with my journey of discovery from the 1960s onwards.

MY JOURNEY CONTINUES

By the mid-1960s, my world was shifting, expanding and changing rapidly, and I was enjoying every moment of it. Now around twenty-two years old, I was swept into the vortex of the anti-Vietnam War mass movement that went beyond the boundaries of race, religion and ethnicity. The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 set me thinking further. Why weren't the world powers who created this mess responding to the legitimate grievances of the Palestinian people?

In these explosive times, there were also tales of extreme brutality through counter-revolution. The classic example was the overthrow of the elected Allende government in Chile by a West-sponsored military coup that ended with the slaughter, murder and disappearance of thousands of Chileans who were opposed to the military junta.

By 1975 the Vietnam War was over but my questioning was just gaining momentum and soon the critical role of the media in nurturing public opinion came into focus for me. That the coverage of these events, particularly in Chile, in the Western mainstream media was woefully biased only deepened my own commitment to enquiry. Like I said, the age of questioning anything and everything had begun and nothing was sacred including the 'truths' published in the vaunted 'free press' of the 'free world'. I would no longer genuflect before the 'gospels' of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or *Newsweek*. It's amazing what an unjust war can do.

The years rolled by; I was almost thirty years old, and married with two children. By this time, I was working as a film-maker, chronicling my times through films, documentaries and television serials. I read widely and furiously to keep abreast of events taking place in India and around

the world.

What really grabbed my attention were certain political events in India that would have far-reaching consequences for its future. The first was the rise of the chauvinist and right-wing political vigilantes who held the city of Mumbai to ransom for decades. Soon, they would spread their influence across the state. I slowly came to realise that these thugs had the backing of political warlords and big business. It was a direct challenge to the Constitution of India, but it was also a political lesson: when large sections of people of a linguistic state feel alienated, what binds them together is their language, which transforms into the idea of 'sons of the soil'. Almost like a ripple effect, other parochial forces began emerging around the country. The vision of the Constitution-makers was quite rapidly eroding.

I witnessed the Maoist uprising in India and the armed insurgencies in the Northeast of the country. I was exposed to the pain and anger of Dalit writers and poets, 'the untouchables', as they revealed their raw and open wounds and their anger at their dehumanised existence. It was so similar to the pain and anger in the writings of the leaders of the Black Panther movement in the US.

Even as the Vietnam War came to a close in 1975, there was a further assault on the Constitution of India when the rights of all citizens were suspended with the declaration of a State of Emergency. The unspeakable horrors of those years have still not been fully recorded. A few years later, I was aghast as the communal rampaging that regularly occurred in India took on a new form. It was the indiscriminate slaughter of Sikhs in Delhi and elsewhere in the country after the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. An entire community was targeted because of the actions of a few of their members. Once again, no one was really held accountable.⁵

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in support of the socialist government that was being opposed by militias and drug warlords. I did not agree with this intrusion even though I knew that many of these so-called resistance fighters and militias were being nurtured and armed by the West and Saudi Arabia.⁶ Some were tribal warlords and others plain mercenaries, and soon these thugs would be called 'freedom

fighters' against the 'godless' communists.

Then, the unthinkable happened. The Soviet Union collapsed—both as an entity and an idea. The apartheid regime in South Africa, surreptitiously supported by the West, collapsed too and Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress assumed power. A few dreams were being realised; so many were lost.

I must now move quickly forward to the horrific attack on the World Trade Centre in New York City and the Pentagon by messianic zealots on 11 September 2001. It was this attack that led the US to declare a War on Terror. It was a phrase that still resonates across the world and the first country to be targeted under its retributive anger was Afghanistan. It was invaded and the regime in power was overthrown. The US had announced to the United Nations that from now on it would strike where it had to with or without its permission. What the US perceived as Terror transcended International Law.

But was this war in Afghanistan really against terrorism?

TERRORISM AND PROFIT

The story dished out to the world was that the US and other NATO forces invaded Afghanistan because they were going after the terrorist outfit Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden. What was omitted from the narrative was that this same bin Laden was a product of the West, a man hailed as a 'freedom fighter' when he was fighting against the Soviets. After the Soviet departure and a few confrontations with the US, he was rebranded a 'terrorist'.

Nomenclature, that was all there was to it, wasn't it?

Soon there were whispers about another reason behind the invasion of Afghanistan. The whispers began when it was revealed that the man who took charge of the country after the defeat of the Taliban had an extremely dubious history. There were stories of the close proximity of his family with the CIA and there were rumours too of a huge economic deal that was aborted.

Finally, and very recently, a former British diplomat and an ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, revealed that the war had much more to do with a major US company called Unocal, oil and natural gas, and a pipeline that would transport these incredibly lucrative commodities from the fields of Central Asia through Afghanistan to a port in Pakistan. The company was secretly negotiating with the Taliban, the new rulers of Afghanistan, on the terms and conditions for the safe flow of gas through the country. One of the negotiators for the company was a Mr Karzai.

The talks failed.

Some years later, the War on Terror was launched and the Taliban were overthrown. The man who was 'elected' under the supervision of American firepower was the same Hamid Karzai, the former negotiator. It

was a classic case of killing two birds with one stone.

Double-speak, manufacturing lies, creating discontent, hidden agendas . . . all of this came into my consciousness because of a war. Vietnam had opened up so many possibilities and so many surprises. And I was grateful for this extraordinary journey that I had lived through and, to a large extent, experienced.

THE ROAD TO VIETNAM

I know I have still not answered the question I posed earlier: why did it take me so long to visit this country?

The answer begins in December 2015 when I discover something: I have a malignant tumour in my brain and two benign ones in my throat. My doctors are concerned because the primary source of this malignant tumour has not been revealed. I have had three surgeries. As I lie recovering in the ICU of the hospital in Mumbai, I ask the doctor how long I will need to stay, because I would like to travel. He seems surprised but smiles.

‘You can leave in a couple of days, and after about ten days you can travel.’

‘Good.’

‘Where do you want to go?’ he enquires.

‘To Vietnam,’ I reply.

The doctor looks at me quizzically and shrugs. ‘But why there?’

I didn’t want to tell him that, even as I lay hallucinating because of the after-effects of the anaesthesia in the ICU of the hospital, there was one strange image that repeatedly entered my mind. It was the image of a naked young girl around seven or eight years old who was fleeing her village along with her neighbours. The village had just been scorched down by napalm bombs, and the girl was running and screaming as her skin peeled away because of the chemicals unleashed. It was one of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War. Could I tell this to the doctor in the ICU of the hospital?

I didn’t. It was the middle of March 2016. At the beginning of April, I was in Vietnam.

We travelled from Hanoi in the north to Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta in the south by road. It was one of the most elevating experiences that I have had. I could tell you about the hospitality and grace of the people that we met. Or about the wonderful food and comfortable hotels we stayed in. I could also tell you about the growing manufacturing power of the country, and its open-door policy to all nations that can contribute to its development. Yet, along with these images of a country surging forward there were constant reminders of the recent past. As we drove the 1,800 kilometres from north to south, I was surprised at the sheer number of memorials to the dead in village after village and town after town along the highway.

Finally, one of our guides told us softly, 'You are on the National Highway, so you can see these memorials. There are many more across this land which you cannot see. We are building our future because of our dead.'

I looked at him and thought about the price this country has paid just to be able to stand on its feet.

The War Memorial Museum in Ho Chi Minh City magnified a hundredfold what I had glimpsed in Mai Lai. It was a devastating experience and also an uplifting one. At one level, there was the immense carnage in close-up, at another the incredible resilience and will of the Vietnamese people, and finally the images of solidarity and comradeship that the people from all over the world had shown.

I looked around and there were hundreds of tourists who were silently viewing the exhibits on display.

Who were these people? Many of them could have been ageing anti-war activists from earlier times who were now bringing their children and grandchildren to witness the horrors of this war. So many of the visitors could have been people who had participated in this brutality and were now confronting their past. But, I believe that most of the other visitors were just ordinary people who had been informed by their parents and grandparents about a war in which an impoverished people had risen up in revolt against an unjust and imperial power. This message would be passed on from generation to generation. It was part of the collective memory of people around the world and the message conveyed was a simple one: resistance to oppression was possible.

What follows next is a memory of another kind . . .

FINDING ROOTS

I was shooting a documentary on the exquisite tenth-century Hindu and Jain temples at Ellora, in Maharashtra. Most of the shooting was complete and I decided to set up my last shot, a panoramic view, so that the viewer would be able to understand the scale of what had been achieved so many centuries ago. But I would have to wait for the hordes of visitors to depart so that I could capture a calmer, more sedate feel.

As my crew and I waited, I started to get impatient because the sun was setting and soon it would be dark. Finally, the crowds departed. I quickly placed two members of the production crew in strategic spots to control the entry of stragglers and, with just a few minutes before darkness descended, I asked the cameraman to 'start rolling'. Just as he was about to take the shot, he raised his head and looked at me.

'What's happened?' I asked angrily.

He pointed to one of the temples. I turned to look and saw a strange sight. It was group of about ten people who had walked to the base of a temple. They placed a small bundle on the steps of it and began to pray with bowed heads.

I walked up hurriedly to request them to finish their prayers as quickly as possible. By the way they were dressed, I gathered they were villagers from the northwest of the country. Who the hell were they?

There were two elderly men in dhoti-kurta and turbans, and two elderly women in saris. The rest of the group comprised two young men in trousers and shirts who wore turbans too, and four young children, three boys and a girl. I was surprised by the complete concentration on their faces. Their eyes were shut and they were deep in prayer.

How do I speed up their prayers, I wondered. And what was in that

bundle that they had placed on the steps?

After a while, the members of the group began to open their eyes and one of the elderly men noticed me. He smiled. I, not knowing what else to do, smiled too.

‘Where are you from?’ I asked him.

‘We are from a village . . . near Jaisalmer, in Rajasthan.’

They had come such a long way to visit this temple, at least 1,500 kilometres.

‘What brings you here?’ I asked. ‘Rajasthan is so far away.’

‘We come to pray at this temple every two years.’

‘Every two years?’

The man nodded. The other elderly man now joined in the conversation.

‘We take a week off from work. Three days to get here by bus and train. Then we spend a day here and then go back home by bus and train.’

‘Do you visit all the temples or just this one?’

One of the young men answered, ‘Just this one . . . it is very close to our hearts.’

‘Why?’

‘Our forefathers built this one. We are artisans from Rajasthan and our forefathers came all the way here to build this temple. Other artisans from other parts of the country came to build the other temples.’

I stood there stunned by what I had heard. Could this be true? ‘How do you know your forefathers built this temple?’

‘We have been artisans for many, many generations. We might be illiterate, but we pass on our history from one generation to the next by telling them the stories of our past.’

I looked at the man for a moment, then turned my gaze to the women and children. The women hurriedly covered their faces and the children smiled. I smiled at them too.

‘What’s in that bundle?’ I asked

The first elderly man opened the cloth bundle to reveal several types of chisels, hammers and cutters. There were a few wooden wedges too. ‘These are our implements. We bring them with us and we ask God to bless them so that we can do good work just as our ancestors did.’

I quietly nodded, not knowing what to say, and headed back to my

team.

‘The sun has set,’ said my production manager. ‘There will be enough light for just two more minutes to take the shot if those people leave.’

‘We will take the shot tomorrow,’ I replied.

Now my crew of around fifteen people was surprised. They slowly began packing up the equipment. I turned my gaze back to those people at the temple. They had settled down on the ground in front of it and were eating their dinner. I watched them for a while, and then soon it turned dark.

A TALE OF REACHING OUT

A few years ago, I was driving on a dusty road in the Gulbarga district of Karnataka when I noticed some graves under a huge, shady tree in a vast empty field. The image was surreal because the tree seemed to be flourishing in a parched landscape. It was as though its only function was to protect the graves from the blazing heat. I turned my gaze away, and noticed that a little further up was a stalled truck which was being repaired by a Sikh driver and cleaner.

The image of the tree and the graves returned to me. As we neared the truck, I asked my chauffeur-cum-man Friday Ayub to stop the car and reverse. My wife Jennifer, sitting at the back of the car, was surprised.

‘Why are you reversing?’ she asked.

‘Those graves looked so incredibly lonely. So, I am going to pay them a visit.’

Jennifer and I alighted when we were abreast of the tree. Ayub, not to be left behind, got out too, and the three of us walked up to the graves.

I looked at the graves solemnly for a while and then up at the tree. In this desolate landscape, the graves seemed to be in the perfect shady spot. Who were the people buried here? The graves did not look very ancient. Were they members of a family? Who did this empty and dusty field belong to? Were they descendants of the people in the graves? Since the graves looked somewhat abandoned, I also wondered if there was a caretaker to look after them.

As these thoughts crossed my mind, I noticed that the truck driver and cleaner had also joined us and were standing next to the graves in silence. We stood for some moments longer, and as Jennifer, Ayub and I turned to leave, the Sikh driver pointed to the graves, and asked, ‘Are

these people your relatives?’

I smiled and shook my head.

‘No.’

The cleaner looked confused. ‘Then why did you stop here . . . sir?’

‘I don’t know. The graves looked so lonely so I decided to pay my respects to the dead . . . I don’t know what else to say.’

The driver smiled. ‘You did the right thing. We didn’t know what you were doing so we joined you too.’

I smiled too.

The driver added, ‘When you do things like this you feel peace in your heart.’

THE TALE OF A CAUSE CÉLÈBRE

I read a news report some time ago which made me chuckle. It had all the ingredients of a tale from the *Panchatantra*, and yet this story was set in November 2017.

It was set in a police station in north India, a space that in these lands is infamous for its brutality, corruption and inefficiency. Besides, these are places where the poor and disenfranchised are extremely hesitant to enter for fear of being detained and charged for petty crimes that the police cannot solve. The arrest of a vagrant tends not to raise too many eyebrows.

In the retelling of this tale, I have added a little drama of my own but retained the basic thrust of the various news reports that emerged from the event.



There was a man named Kamlesh who lived in a small, bustling township in north India. He was a hired hand, looking after a number of donkeys that were owned by a group of traders. The job helped him earn a meagre living: the donkeys would carry goods and material from one point of the hamlet to another, and Kamlesh would get a small percentage of the earnings. It wasn't much, but Kamlesh was happy doing an honest day's work. In return, he took care of his animals as best he could and, when there was no job at hand, he would allow them to forage wherever they pleased—even other peoples' homes, backyards and nearby farmlands.

Very often the donkeys would also wander into the Thane police

station. Sometimes they would create a nuisance by entering the Complaints Section, or hanging around the courtyard, corridors and passageways. That made the thanedar mad, and he would order his men to chase the intruders away. Kamlesh would be summoned and threatened with dire consequences if this infringement of regulations was repeated. Since nothing really dire actually occurred, Kamlesh didn't take these threats seriously, though he did admonish his donkeys for their bad behaviour.

'Terrible fellows,' he would mutter to his herd. 'One day, you are going to get me into trouble.'

This went on for quite a while and then one day that one day arrived.

That day, Kamlesh got a different kind of summons from the cops. He could sense it by the expression on the messenger's face.

When Kamlesh arrived at the police station, he saw that the donkeys had been cornered by a group of policemen, who had their arms outstretched to prevent the animals from escaping. It looked funny, but Kamlesh kept a straight face. Then he turned his eyes away and what he saw sent a chill down his spine.

Standing in the centre of the police courtyard was an enraged thanedar, glaring ferociously. Kamlesh felt his knees giving way.

'So you have come, you scoundrel!' thundered the thanedar.

Kamlesh whimpered. 'Yes, your lordship,' he said. 'What has happened?'

'What has happened?' screamed the thanedar. 'You are asking me what has happened? I'll tell you what has happened. These bloody donkeys of yours have ruined my plans. That is what has happened!'

Kamlesh looked surprised. 'How have they ruined your plans, my lord?'

'I'll tell you how, you scoundrel . . . this is a police station and jail is it not?'

'Yes, my lord.'

'Aren't people frightened of coming here?'

Kamlesh whispered, 'Yes, my lord.'

The thanedar glared at Kamlesh and then said, 'So I decided to make it a little more people-friendly. I decided to brighten up the place . . . make it look more welcoming. That's when I got an idea to beautify it with

some plants, shrubs and saplings that would make it look more like a home. I ordered for some very expensive plants all the way from Karnataka. I thought this would brighten things up and make these bleak surroundings look friendly. Was that a good idea?’

Kamlesh nodded.

‘Do you know what happened to all those expensive plants, saplings and shrubs,’ shouted the thanedar. And then he answered his own question. ‘Last night, they all were eaten up by your donkeys. They feasted till this morning and ruined all my plans . . . what should I do now? Answer me, you scoundrel!’

Kamlesh bowed his head in shame as the thanedar continued, ‘So, I have decided to arrest your donkeys and put them away . . .’

Kamlesh wailed, ‘My lord, what will I do . . . they are the means of my livelihood. How will I survive?’

‘You should have thought about that earlier. We had given you enough warning . . .’

The Thanedar turned to his men and shouted, ‘Take these miserable creatures away!’

It took five policemen to round up the donkeys and take them away.

Kamlesh went back home inconsolable. How would the owners respond to his predicament?

Well, they were furious and threatened to cut his salary for the earnings lost.

What Kamlesh did not know was that there was a small-time journalist who witnessed the arrest of the donkeys. The journalist, sensing a great story, filed his report immediately. It appeared in one newspaper, then was picked up by another, then by a television channel and, within a couple of days, the story was making national headlines, and people across the country were chuckling and laughing at this quaint bit of news.

Then the social media nerds got into the act and the story along with innumerable and imaginative variations began to make the rounds and thousands of enthusiastic people began to follow its twists and turns. The donkeys became a ‘cause célèbre’, and Kamlesh, a household name.

The higher-ups in the police department soon realised that they were becoming a laughing stock and decided to act swiftly. Within five days the donkeys were released and they were given a hero’s welcome by the

country. Kamlesh heaved a sigh of relief.

How I wish we had more such stories in our news. It's a damned sight better than discussing the tattoo on Virat Kohli's shoulder or the dinner that Shah Rukh Khan attended.

What you never learn in college.

THE CONFESSION

Ladies and gentlemen, I am now going to present to you a theory on economics, politics and memory. This theory was propounded by an ageing yet dreaded mafia don turned politician from Mumbai to an Indian student who was interviewing him at his home. The student was studying mass media at a reputed university in the US.

How do I know the story? A friend of a friend who knew a cousin of the Indian student told me. I found the concept fascinating, but I must however caution the reader about our don's language. It is foul at times and some readers might be disturbed, for which I apologise.

The interview is conducted in Mumbai. My ageing and dreaded mafia don-turned-politician Narayan B. speaks to young Pankaj Patel. It is late evening and they are both seated facing each other in a large, plush room with ornate furniture that overlooks a vast expanse of sea. It is a room in Narayan B.'s magnificent apartment. A well-dressed and tough-looking aide, Rongya, about thirty years old, sits some distance away. Narayan B. turns to Pankaj.

Narayan: What did you say your name was?

Pankaj: Pankaj Patel, sir . . . from Columbia University.

N: Where is that?

P: In New York, sir.

N (nodding slowly): Where will this interview be published?

P: In the *Huffington Post*, sir . . . it's a new paper but doing very well in New York and . . .

Rongya excitedly enters the conversation: Dada, I have heard of it . . . a lot of important people are reading it.

N (nodding and looking at Pankaj): Why do you want to interview me?

P: I was told that the story of your life was an economic miracle. You started from the streets . . . and today . . . you are—

N: I am what?

P: Well . . . a very influential man.

N: Yes . . . I call myself a social worker . . . I have done quite a bit . . . (Narayan turns to Rongya) Can you tell him about that?'

R: Dada has opened two colleges, one in Satara, the other in Karad. In Ahmadnagar, he also has—

P (interrupting Rongya): I know about all that, the colleges, the scholarships, free toilets for the needy . . . I have the whole list. But I need to know something more.

R: Do you know he has also got the Padma Bhushan?

P: I know that too . . . I have done quite a bit of homework.

Rongya turns silent as Narayan asks quietly, ominously: What more do you need to know about me?

P: Sir, the story that everyone knows but nobody talks about . . .

N: Like what?

Pankaj hesitates then says softly: The things you did . . . to get you where you are today. I was told it would make a great film, just like *The Godfather*.

R (smiling excitedly): I have seen that film! Yeah, Dada's journey is like that too . . . very good film . . .

Narayan stares at him and Rongya shuts up.

N (turning to Pankaj): So you want a story about my rise from the gutters of this city?

P: Right, sir.

N: Why do you want to tell my story?

P: I want people around the world to know that if they have dreams, they can make it, no matter what the odds, sir . . .

N (stares at Pankaj for a moment and then mutters softly): I think you are an asshole.

P (shocked): Why . . . why, sir?

N: Because what you just said was a load of shit . . . this is something that my wife taught me. She was a graduate too, she was an M.A. (Pauses) She taught me a lot, yeah, she told me that for every person like me there are hundreds, maybe thousands who get nowhere. So, don't give me all that dreams bullshit. I've seen too much in life to believe that. Now I'll tell you things that assholes like you need to know but first put that recorder off.

Pankaj is still shell-shocked. He hesitates for a moment and then switches off the recorder.

N: Do you still want to talk to me?

Pankaj hesitates then nods.

N: Are you an Indian or American?

P: Indian, sir.

N: You sound like an American.

P: I've spent about six years there, as an undergraduate, and now I'm doing my Master's in journalism. This is my final semester and project and then I graduate.

N: And then?

P: I'll come back.

N (laughing): Why the hell did you have to go all the way there? You could have come to me and I would have taught you journalism for free.

P: You, sir?

N: Yeah. In fact, if my wife Urmila was alive, she would teach you much more! Anyway, you want to be a patrakar, na?

Pankaj nods.

N: Like all those pompous fuckers on TV. They think they own the world! (Pauses) Now let me tell you that almost everything those fuckers say is what their bosses want them to. This is my lesson number one. What do you think of it? Was it taught at your University?

Pankaj is silent.

N: Who do you think owns these major newspapers and television channels? Who the fuck owns them?

P: You don't have to get angry, sir.

N: I'm not angry, this is the way I speak. Now answer my question: who owns the newspapers and television channels?

P: I think they are owned by big industrialists, sir.

N: You think? They are! Most of them are. What do you think these owners want?

P (thoughtfully): I think they will . . . promote their interests.

N: What about America? Who owns the media there?

P: It is also owned by big business.

N: Now you are being smart. Today, most of these owners and their paid journalists are hand-in-glove with the government, with bureaucrats, with anyone who can help them out. Do you understand?

Pankaj nods.

N: This is lesson number one and a half. The job of journalists today is to not let the reader know that they are paid pimps. You understand? (Turning to Rongya) Get me my whisky. (And turning back to Pankaj) Rongya is the son of my first gang partner. His name was Pakya. He joined me when he was fourteen years old. He died in 1978 . . . fuck . . . in a gang war. He was my childhood friend. That's why I treat Rongya like my son. I sent him to college for an MBA degree. He handles quite a bit of my business in Mumbai. Anyway, back to what I was saying . . . It's the big guys who control the media because they realise that too much truth is bad for their economic health.

Narayan B. laughs at his own joke, raises his hand and continues.

N: But! They don't stop the truth. They control it. The scams of this political party is played up, the scams of the other is played down. It is a great game. And it is all a fucking sham . . . (Stops and stares at Pankaj) You must be wondering why I am telling you all this?

P: Yes, sir.

N: Because it will not published, and I need to get a lot of things off my chest.

P: Why, sir?

N: Because sometimes I get dreams at night. I think about things . . . disturbing stuff. Do you know what being backward caste or scheduled caste means?

Pankaj is silent.

N: It teaches you a lot about the shit in this world. The slums of Antop Hill was the best college in the world. It taught you that you were kachra, the dregs of society, and how to fight and survive. Have you been to a slum here? That's where 70 per cent of the fucking city lives: scheduled castes, backward castes, the Muslims, newly arrived poor migrants looking for jobs—

P (interrupting him excitedly): I did go to a slum once—Dharavi.

N: Why?

P: I was in college here, in St Xaviers, and we went on a study tour of Dharavi. It is supposed to be the biggest slum in India . . . We saw all the different kinds of businesses, the scrap industry, the recycling industry, women in the sewing business . . .

N: How long did you spend there?

P: About two hours.

N: You must have been amazed by what you saw.

P: I was.

Rongya returns with a glass of whisky. Narayan stares at Pankaj silently. Pankaj looks uncomfortable.

N (shaking his head): That is why you are an asshole! Two fucking hours and you think you've understood the life of a slum-dweller? Of course there are businesses in slums. People have to survive. For every owner who is making some money, there must be at least sixty slaves who are just about alive! Many of the men are drunk out of desperation, and it is the women and sober men who go out and work for people like you—all the maids, cooks, plumbers, electricians and house cleaners. (Taking a large sip of whisky.) Now let me tell you my story. I was twelve years old when I quit school because the family needed the money. My mother always told me that I was a good student, but . . . that's the way life is. In one year's time, I had learned that the fastest way to earn money was in the black market. I started with cinema tickets, got involved with the bigger guys and moved into drugs and booze, adulterating medicines and stealing petrol . . . See this finger?'

He holds up the index finger of his left hand that is cut in half. Pankaj leans forward to inspect it.

N: I lost that in a fucking gang war. Anyway, I then moved on to silver and gold smuggling . . . it was handled by the fucking Muslim gangs. In ten years, I was making so much money I started a gang of my own. I was just twenty years old. I made it because I made sure I kept the cops happy, and also the small-time politicians . . . they all got their fee.

Pankaj nods.

N: That is lesson number two: keep the cops and politicians happy and you will survive as a hoodlum. Soon I was running the rackets in Antop Hill, Chunabhatti, Sion, Kurla and parts of Chembur. Mumbai was run by many gangs. Each area had some kind of boss. Some led by Marathas, some by backward castes, some scheduled caste gangs, and a few fucking south Indian and Muslim gangs too. Sometimes the gangs collaborated with each other. Sometimes we went to war. I was in the big league—extortion, gambling, matka numbers. I got to meet the big-time politicians. They backed us too. By the age of twenty-eight, I was a fucking gangster as they say in American movies. Then I got married to the girl I loved. She lived in the slum too. Urmila . . . she died in 2002. A long time ago, but I still think of her . . .

P: Why don't you tell me her story, sir?

N: Why do you want to know?

P: I am just curious . . .

Narayan stares at Pankaj, then makes up his mind. He finishes the whisky in one gulp, and Rongya gets up, picks the glass and walks away.

N (looking sharply at Pankaj): Are you sure your recorder is off?

Pankaj nods. Narayan begins to speak slowly . . .

NARAYAN'S LOVE STORY

N: We were neighbours. She lived in the scheduled caste area and I in the area for the backward castes. Fuck . . . even in slums there is this distinction. This for scheduled castes, this for the fucking Muslims, this for backward castes, this for the fucking forward backward castes, and a small area for the poor upper castes . . . Areas for the Biharis, UP walas, south Indians. Urmila lived in the scheduled caste area but it was not far from where I lived.

I first saw her when I was around twenty-two years old. You might ask why it took me so long to notice her if she lived close by. Frankly, I was so busy making money for my family, I didn't have time for anything else. Then one day I saw her . . . she had just passed her twelfth, so she must have been sixteen or seventeen. Her family and neighbours were celebrating because she had done well. I was passing by and caught sight of her. I just stood and stared, and then she turned and saw me too. It was like in the movies . . . You know what happened then?

She smiled at me and then quickly turned away. Her family members and neighbours saw me and hurriedly entered their homes because I was considered a . . . a kind of mawali, a goonda. I even had two gang members with me. But that one look of hers was enough. I was smitten.'

P: Just that one look?

N: I am like that, it just took that one look. My friends warned me that she was a scheduled caste girl, but it didn't matter to me. She was beautiful and educated. And that smile . . . it was . . . I still remember the date . . . 15th of April 1962. For three days, as I went about my business, I thought

about her and then I took a decision. I went to her home and met her parents. The father worked in a garage and her mother worked in three homes as a cleaner. They were terrified to see me, but I calmed them down and told them that I wanted to marry their daughter. They were shocked, but I told them my intentions were pure. (Laughs) They didn't know what to say, so I said, why don't you ask her for her opinion?

Her father called out to Urmila and she emerged from the small inner room. Her home had just two small rooms . . . She looked at me and said, 'I heard what you told my parents. Why do you want to marry me?'

I was surprised and tried to search for an answer and then she calmly said, 'I have noticed you a number of times.' This is how the conversation went then:

'You noticed me?'

'Yes, ever since I was twelve years old.'

'What did you notice in me?'

She smiled and said, 'You seem to know what you want.'

'That I do. I learnt that lesson early . . .'

She nodded and added, 'I also know you do illegal things.'

'Like what?'

'I don't know, but people talk about you.'

'Does it bother you?'

Urmila shook her head. 'I am a Dalit . . . and I know what struggle means.'

I was amazed by this answer.

She turned to her parents and said, 'I like him . . . can I marry him?'

The parents looked at her anxiously, and then her father said, 'We are Dalits and he—'

I immediately intervened to reassure them, 'It does not matter to me.'

The mother was still worried. 'She is only seventeen years old. We wanted to send her to college.'

I turned to Urmila. 'Do you want to go to college?' She nodded, so I added, 'I can wait for three years, then we can get

married.'

Her parents did not know what to say. For a while there was silence and then Urmila said to me, 'I have one more request to make.'

'What is it?'

'After we get married I want to do my MA.'

'What is that?'

Urmila smiled. 'Just two more years of studying . . .'

'Even after college?'

'Yes, I want to be a scholar . . .'

I hesitated and then said, 'Okay . . . but what more do you want to study?'

'I want to study the complete works of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar.'

'Did he write a lot?'

'Yes . . . and I want to understand what he had to say about our country and our world.'

I nodded like I knew what she was saying. All I did know was that she was a very determined young girl and I liked that. She would be educated and therefore a good mother for our children when we would have them. So I grandly told her, 'I can wait for you to finish that too.' Now, Urmila was shocked. 'You will?' I nodded. 'I can wait till then . . . but not any longer . . . you will be twenty-three years old by then.'

P (smiling): 'So you waited for five years. Why?'

N: There was something about Urmila. I don't know, but I didn't mind waiting . . .

P: What did you do for those five years?

N: I did my dhanda and waited. I would meet her once in a while, go to a film, take her to a fancy restaurant, but no hanky-panky. No hanky-panky! I had made a promise. I am a man of my word. By the age of twenty-five,

I moved my parents out of the slums to a small apartment in Chembur, I got my younger sister married and my younger brother joined my gang . . . I was doing great.

P: And then?

N: Five years later, Urmila and I got married . . . a backward caste man and a Dalit woman. We had a great wedding right in the middle of the slum and I spent about two lakhs of rupees on it. Two lakhs in 1967 was a lot of money, but what the hell, I was happy and I wanted to show off. We danced and we sang and everyone had a great time. After the wedding, we moved to our brand-new apartment in Khar. In five years, we had two children. My daughter was named Uttara, the northern star.

R (reappearing with a glass of whisky): She is Dada's favourite.

P: Is she?

R: Yeah, and she is married to a big winery owner and has three children.

P: I hear her husband makes very good wines, and every year they have a festival of music and wines . . .

N: So you've done some homework. Yeah, they have a cultural festival every year, and all the fucking 'respectable' intellectuals from Maharashtra attend that festival . . . writers, painters, musicians. The fuckers have a great time with free booze and music.

P (laughing): You also have a son named Shekhar who is a businessman in Macau and he has two children.

N (smiling ironically): Yeah, he's a shitty businessman. The bastard has sunk quite a fortune in the casinos. He's drunk most of the time and frightened of coming back and meeting me. Ever since he was a child, Urmila would keep telling me I was spoiling him by letting him do

whatever he wanted. I should have listened to her.

P: I was told that you loved her very much . . .

N: It is. Whatever she wanted I gave her, whatever!

P: Did she ask for a lot of things?

N: No. In fact, she never really asked for anything. I used to buy her fancy sarees, and she would smile and say, 'Thank you. But can you get me cotton ones?' When I bought our first flat in Santa Cruz, she accepted it. Most women would go ooh and aah, but not Urmila. Even when I bought my first Mercedes Benz, she just smiled. But she never said anything to hurt me. She just accepted things. Did you know she was a professor?

Pankaj nods.

N: She would take a bus to the University every day.

P: Why did she do that?

N: I don't know. That is the way she was. She would even go down the road to buy vegetables and stuff . . . fuck. I had two fancy cars, three maids, two servants, and she would buy the vegetables from the street herself. (Shakes his head) I think it was because she felt I was doing stuff she didn't quite like. Maybe that was the reason. It is only when I became a minister that she began to travel by car. I think it was around 1984.'

P: Did you ever have arguments with her . . . a fight perhaps?

N: Never! (Pauses for a think) No that's not right. We had an argument once. It was a big argument and I slapped her. It was on the 7th of September . . . 1984. I still remember the date.

P: How come?

N: I won't tell you . . . it still disturbs me. But after that I apologised for a whole month and she forgave me.

P: Did the argument have to do with politics?

N: I told you I won't tell you. If you ask me again, I'll have you thrown out.

P: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you that. Was she a good mother to your children?

N: She was very good with Uttara, got her interested in books and music and literature. But with Shekhar, she was very strict . . . because I used to spoil him. She said I was making him a selfish brat.

P: Was it true?

N: When I see what he has become today, I realise she was right.

P: How did she die?

N: I don't know. She had a fever and I took her to the best hospital. The fever just wouldn't go, and then suddenly she started vomiting, and in four days' time she was dead. It was on the 12th of December 2002; she was just fifty-seven years old. She was the one who taught me . . . In fact, whatever I have told you till now is because of what she made me understand . . . (Takes another large swig from his glass) Do you have a girlfriend?

P (smiling awkwardly): I had one . . . then we broke up.

N: You young people break up too easily, very little patience. Was she a gori?

P: Yes, she was. Irish-American.

N (sighing): This breaking-up business is imported from the West. Look at me, one wife for thirty-four years, then she died. I admit that I had two mistresses while we were married; I still have one.

Pankaj smiles.

N: Yeah, just like all gangsters. But let me tell you, I always loved Urmila. She was the one who gave me strength, who taught me so many things in life. And she never judged me. (Whispering) I still miss her.

He finishes his drink. Rongya leaves with the empty glass.

N: Anyway, back to my story. Now, the big fucking politicians began to ask for favours from us and soon the gangs began joining political parties. They relied on our muscle power and we needed their political protection. Do you understand?

Pankaj doesn't look like he does.

N: Gangs are the 'mai-baap' of a neighbourhood. They control the area because they are feared . . . but they also deliver quick justice for grievances. People tend to forget what we do when they need our services. Anyway, soon I got sucked into one political party. I won't name it, but I'm sure you know which one. After joining, we were asked to destroy the trade unions because the mill owners and other big industrialists thought they were getting in the way.

(Pauses, shifts his weight on the sofa)

So, we smashed the trade unions. They were the most dangerous. We began fucking the communists and the socialists. Where are they in the city today? Nowhere!

Pankaj nods.

N: Later, my party would attack north Indians . . . because those fuckers would take up any job—cab drivers, auto-rickshaw drivers, cleaners, mechanics, petrol pump attendants, anything. They must have been desperate. We wanted those jobs for our people. Plus, and this is the most important part, the bastards didn't vote for us. That's why we wanted to teach them a lesson. So, what did we do? We played the 'us' versus 'them' card: sons of the soil versus outsiders. It always works. This is lesson number three! But let me tell you Urmila did not agree with this. She even told me so.

P: What did she say?

N: That they are just poor people looking for work.

P: Was that the argument you were talking about?

N: What argument?

P: The one when you slapped her?

Narayan stares at Pankaj and then slowly nods.

N: Yeah, it was one hell of a political argument. It was the first time she ever discussed my business. I think I should have you thrown out of my house, but it is good to get this off my chest. Nobody knows about this, not even the children because she never told anybody.

Rongya arrives hurriedly with a fresh glass of whisky.

N: Get something for this guy too. (Turning to Pankaj) What will you have?

P: Nothing, sir. Just a glass of water.

N: Glass of water? At this time?

P (looking sheepish): I tried a beer once, I didn't like it. Just a glass of water, please.

N: No alcohol? Maybe that is why that girlfriend of yours left you.

Pankaj smiles.

N: But I must get back to my story. Things began to change politically and our party changed too. It was time for the Muslims to be taught a lesson. There were two reasons for this: one of their gangs had become very powerful. The fuckers thought they owned the city. And the second reason was that most of the Muslims in the city didn't vote for us. So, it was time to kill two birds with one stone. Remember the time when we destroyed that mosque in Ayodhya?

P: It was 1992, wasn't it?

N: Yeah, some Muslims got angry and began to shout and scream in the city. So, we saw an opportunity. We created rumours and then we attacked. The fucking city was brought to a halt for twenty days! It burned like a fucking bonfire. It finally ended when that Muslim gang detonated those fucking bombs blasts. It was really hell. (Pausing) You see that silver Ganesh idol there? (Points to a silver idol on his left) It was a gift from a scared Bohri Muslim trader. Anyway, the communal angle was a camouflage. A fucking camouflage . . .

Rongya arrives with a glass of water.

N: Now remember this: religion is a great tool to arouse people. I personally finance the two biggest pandals in Chembur and Sion for Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja. I also fund a few Navratris to keep the people occupied.

There is silence for a couple of minutes.

N: But there was one trade union leader who I will not forget. He was different. He was also a don like me, but he took another path. He didn't believe in this us versus them, Hindu-Muslim stuff. He could have been like me, much bigger even. Sometimes when I'm drunk, I think about him. He was really different, yeah . . . I think Urmila respected him. She even talked to me about him. Yeah, he was different.

THE TALE OF ANOTHER DON

His name was Krishna Desai. Nobody knows exactly when he was born, but some people say it was around 1920 in Mumbai. Also, nobody knows why he quit school at the age of ten, but some elderly people in the neighbourhood say that he was sick of being enclosed in a classroom. Besides, he had other plans.

Krishna then lived off his wits in the neighbourhoods of Lalbaug, Saat Rasta and Parel—a bit of thievery, and a little pilfering from the railway yards, warehouses and factories. In the late 1930s, when he was barely eighteen years old, Krishna organised a small gang and got into the rackets of extortion and turf warfare. His muscle-power services were used by small-time traders, merchants and factory owners who needed to threaten or even eliminate the competition.

By the early 1940s, Krishna's reputation had grown to include murder and rioting. There is the strange tale of his gang burning down Elphinstone Railway Station at the time of Mahatma Gandhi's call for a mass movement to force the British to 'Quit India'. After the act of arson, Krishna ducked below the radar for a while because the British police came looking for him. They thought he was some kind of terrorist-cum-freedom fighter.

Krishna, of course, was no such thing. He was just an emerging hoodlum who liked to add to the chaos of those electrifying times. He did not know that there was further chaos coming.

The Partition of India was looming on the horizon and tension between communities in the city began to hot up. A spark was all it needed to let loose the street gangs of Hindus and Muslims. Besides, the emerging political warlords had private scores to settle, and businessmen

and industrialists had interests to protect. All of them needed storm troopers, and were prepared to pay for the muscle power of the street gangs.

Yes, those were tense times, and the ordinary citizens of the city were a worried lot.

By early 1946, the first clashes took place, and then the rioting and looting and killing began. Krishna and his gang were in the thick of it all. Though the scale of the slaughter and mayhem did not come anywhere close to what was happening in the north and east of the country, it was enough to enhance Krishna's new image as a feared hoodlum.

The stories of his murderous attacks resounded in the city as the police were unable to stop the mayhem. Muslim gangs from Nagpada, Byculla and Dongri clashed with the gangs from Hindu neighbourhoods. The only people who tried to put a stop to this madness were the Gandhians and the communist trade union leaders.

By the end of 1948, the looting and killing had stopped and Krishna too paused. To think.

For the first time in his life, Krishna paused to think about what he had done. He had killed people he didn't even know. Some of them didn't even belong to gangs. They were just ordinary people trying to earn a living, killed because they were recognisably Muslim. Krishna now recalled the efforts of the left-wing leaders who had tried so hard to dissuade people from killing each other. They had gone to Muslim and Hindu neighbourhoods, and even those that had a mixed population of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs.

Who the hell were those guys?

He had seen the trade union leaders organise the workers, both men and women, into a formidable force that numbered more than 3,50,000 people. The workers were Hindus, Muslims and Christians, and from castes low and high, and they came from all parts of the country. They were one solid block, and, to Krishna, they were the largest and most disciplined gang in the city. If they chose to, they could bring the entire city to a halt. But they were not hoodlums. They were the biggest industrial labour force in the country after the Railways.

Krishna, brought up on the sectarian view of separation of castes, languages, communities and religions, was now curious. How could these

separate communities and religions live and work together?

He decided to learn more about this left-wing ideology, and met a few childhood friends who had joined the movement. After a bit of persuasion, two of them escorted him to the trade union office where the senior leaders worked. The leaders were, at first, surprised to see Krishna, and then they realised that his formidable reputation could be a great asset to their cause.

Krishna got into a series of serious discussions with them. The leaders began by telling him about Marx, Engels and Lenin, and what they had written about the history of capitalism and their theories on revolution. Krishna listened for a while, in fact for a few days, and then he short-circuited the lessons. He got to the essence of the grand idea.

What he had gathered was that capitalists and workers stood on opposite sides. Bosses wanted profits and workers a livelihood. Could they work together? They could, but if the workers wanted to safeguard their rights, they had to unite beyond the barriers of caste, gender, religion, language and colour. Everyone was equal.

Krishna liked the idea. A new kind of world had opened up for him. So, he joined the movement. What the unions gained was an icon, because Krishna was not a theoretician like the older leaders but a street-smart fighter who could mobilise workers in a language they understood.

For the next twenty years Krishna Desai was out on the streets and in the homes of the workers. He visited all the textile mills and held meetings and discussions with the workers. He spoke to them about their dreams and aspirations, and very soon he became a part of almost every worker's family. There were tales of him taking workers' children, hundreds of them at a time, out of the city on picnics where they could experience nature and breathe freely outside of the ghettos where they lived. The kids would write plays and stage them. They would write songs of solidarity and sing them. And it was Krishna who encouraged them along. Though the workers respected the trade union leaders, they began to love Krishna Desai because he wasn't an intellectual, he was one of them.

With pressure mounting from the workers, the trade union leaders selected Krishna for state elections and he won by a huge margin. It was a great victory, but in the late 1960s the political and economic climate began to shift. There were two changes of immense significance.

The first was that the output of the textile mills began to decrease, some owners threatened to close down and there were also threats of lay-offs or lockouts in others. It was a warning of things to come. The second was the formation of a new political party that had the blessings of the traditional political warlords in the city, mill owners and big industrialists.

The decline in production could be traced to several reasons: the siphoning off of profits, lack of investments in new machinery, fiscal policies of the government, and outsourcing of work to small-scale outfits. Also, with the land prices rising rapidly, if the textile mills could be closed down, the vast properties on which they were built, right in the heart of the city, could lead to windfall profits.

Then someone remembered that the unions would be an obstacle to these plans. And Krishna Desai, the actual face and voice of the workers, was the biggest threat. What could be done about him?

The answer was simple: elimination.

One night in 1970 he was murdered. His murderers were apprehended and jailed. It was also revealed that they belonged to this new political outfit. But the deed was done.

Krishna Desai was dead.

His funeral procession revealed the love and affection that the people and the workers had for this genuine mass leader. There were more than 2,00,000 marchers, and if one included the women and children and other shell-shocked workers who mourned silently in their homes, the figure would be much, much more.

The leaders and workers of this new political party that had carried out this outrage scurried to safe havens and others begged for police protection as the textile workers, in their thousands, demanded immediate justice. In an ironic twist to this calculated murder, political leaders from the same parties that had backed the vigilante outfit to carry out the crime named a square after Krishna in Lalbaug, the textile neighbourhood where he had grown up and where he died.

It was named Krishna Desai Chowk.

If you ask a citizen of Mumbai today who that square is named after, the most probable answer would be, 'Krishna, who?'

THE FINER POINTS OF POLITICS AND POWER

Narayan seemed to come out of his reverie.

N (speaking slowly): Like I said . . . I only remember Krishna Desai when I drink. The fucker died for his principles. He didn't understand that people very easily forget about principles because they have a life to live and principles don't matter. Do you get what I am saying?

Pankaj nods.

N: Anyway, I prospered in the party. I got to know some big-time stock market manipulators . . . those shanas really knew how to play the banks and buy and sell shares, control the markets. Just like those big fucking manipulators on Wall Street. One of the big-time manipulators I knew got caught, but luckily he died of a heart attack. But I made a lot of money on the stock market too. So, eight years ago, I built two colleges—one for science, arts and commerce, the other for business management. Both of them were named after Urmila because I felt she deserved it. Perhaps I also built those colleges to unburden some of my own guilt, who knows . . . Maybe some time in the future there will be a statue of me and people will say I contributed greatly to education in the state of Maharashtra. They will forget what I had done in the past. (Laughs) Fuck . . . there are so many fancy colleges coming up in the country. Can you guess why?

P: Because the middle-class has more money?

N: Maybe they do, but they are also shit-scared about the future for their

children. They feel that good education and the chances of a better future lie in fancy new buildings. But where are the jobs? Over the last ten years, there are millions of graduates who are in the market looking for work. They are willing to do anything . . . any-fucking-thing! Now tell me, why isn't this being reported in the papers or on television?

P: You tell me, sir.

N (sharply): Are you trying to be smart with me?

P: No, sir! I'm just asking . . .

N (mollified): Okay, I'll tell you. It is bad economics. We have sold a dream about education, and we can't back down now . . . that's why! We only talk about those guys who have made it, who have done great things abroad, landed great jobs here . . . But look at it closely and you will realise that it is only 20 per cent. What about the other 80 per cent? What are they doing? The people don't know these things because you journalists are not allowed to tell them. That's why the dream continues. But the poor know. They have understood it already, so they make their own arrangements—

P: What sort of arrangements?

N: They quit school after the tenth or twelfth standard and get into the job market. Any job will do. They can be cab drivers, mechanics, plumbers, waiters in dhabas, delivery boys, security guards . . . anything.

P: Don't they have greater dreams?

N: Of course they do! Of course they do . . . just like you. But they also know that very few of them make it and when they do, they become like me. There is no other way. Do you understand? (Looks at Pankaj steadily) That's the system that we have created. Anyway, fuck it. I am also a real-estate developer, and I have partners in Dubai, Macau and Mauritius. I

even have stakes in hotels there. (Leans forward conspiratorially and whispers) Now let me tell you a big secret, one your recorder would love to hear.

Pankaj leans forward too.

N: I also run a hawala racket . . . what do you call that in English?

P: Money laundering.

N: Yeah, money laundering for big-time politicians, industrialists, big-time lawyers, film stars . . . the who's who of our country. You want their names? (Leans back and laughs) Isn't that breaking news? Anyway, I am almost seventy-nine years old now, and I think it is time for me to retire. If you want to know anything else about me you can switch on your recorder.

Pankaj smiles too but doesn't do so.

N: So is the interview over?

P: No, sir. We can still chat. I have a question to ask you . . . you don't seem to be proud of your past.

N: The reason is simple. Thanks to Urmila, I don't forget how I got to where I am today. It is not pretty. And I speak frankly about what I did. I also know that this is how most people who have made fortunes started out. You look into their past and you will get the stink of a gutter. Now I want to ask you another question. What did you see in America?

P: What do you mean, sir?

N: Gandu, you went to learn journalism, na? Did you just read books and attend classes, or did you also see life there? So, what the fuck did you see in those six years?

P (haltingly): I saw quite a few very rich people, beautiful shops, homes . . . but I also saw quite a few people who worked very hard to make a living, and some very poor.

N: Tell me, how many would be rich in America . . . and how many others?

P: I don't have the data, but I would guess that about 5 per cent are very rich, about 15 per cent well-off, about 20 per cent comfortable, another 30 per cent hard-working but quite desperate . . .

N: What do you mean, quite desperate?

P: I mean, they are trying hard to make ends meet. Life is tough out there.

N: Okay, that makes 70 per cent. What about the rest?

P: I think the rest, about 25 per cent, are poor.

N: And the last 5 per cent?

Pankaj remains silent. Narayan smiles approvingly.

N: Good. I am glad you noticed something. You have tried to divide the population quite precisely. Now tell me, do the newspapers and television channels in America report what you have told me?

P: What do you mean, sir?

N: Do they tell the people that 60 per cent of them are having a rough time?

Pankaj thinks for a moment and then shakes his head.

N: That's what I mean. If they did so, it would be bad economics! So your

news will be very happy. Everyone having a wonderful time, sports stars, film stars, fashion shows, who is fucking whom, stories about that fucker Bill Gates or some other big shot . . . like the tattoo on Virat Kohli's shoulder, Salman Khan's chest . . . (Smiles) There's that American actress who keeps showing off her tits and arse . . . what's her name?

P: Who are you referring to, sir?

N: That actress, what's her name . . . Kim something?

P: Kardashian?

N: Yeah, that's the one! I saw a photograph of hers. She was balancing a glass of wine on her arse, fuck, and people loved it! (Shakes his head in wonder) See? That's what those journalists do in America, and also here in our country . . . in most of the countries of the world too, you understand?

They both smile.

N: I told you I know a lot, didn't I?

P (smiling): I am getting quite a class on journalism and economics today . . .

N: Did you expect me to be a chutiya? Well, let me tell you, I am not. I know a lot about what's happening—

P: Sir, there is this economist called Thomas Piketty. He has written a book that the whole world is talking about.

N: What is the fucker saying?

P: He says that, over the last fifty years, the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer.

N: So what's new about that? Look at all those desperate people, refugees trying to escape wars and trying to reach Europe. (Softly) Remember that dead child lying on the beach? Fuck. It was terrible . . . Then I think of that American actress who talks about saving refugees . . . what's her name? She also works for the United Nations—

P: Angelina Jolie?

N: Yeah, that's the one. Do you believe she can solve the problem of refugees? Can any fucking film or sports star really solve the problems that the people of the world face? It is when people take things into their own hands that things happen.

P: Yeah, like that journalist in Iraq who picked up his shoes . . .

N (looking confused): Who are you talking about?

R (excitedly): Dada, don't you remember that Iraqi man who gave that farewell kiss to the president of the US? Remember I told you about it?

N (pausing and then smiles widely at Pankaj): Oh, that guy? Yeah, yeah, I remember. He was some guy . . .

THE FAREWELL KISS

It was the year 2008 and George Bush, the outgoing president of the US, was in Iraq for a valedictory address to the people of that country. He was going to hold a press conference with carefully selected media people to let the Iraqi people, but actually the American people, know what a great job he had done, and to talk about the bright future that lay ahead for Iraq and Iraqis. Standing next to him was Iraq's then prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. The war had been raging for several years, but Bush was persuaded it was over and what little remained were just minor skirmishes.

The press conference was carefully planned, and each journalist was thoroughly screened. It was to be Bush's last hurrah as he departed from office. The country was in a terrifying mess, so he wanted this conference to somehow redeem him and his cronies for what they had done.

The conference got under way, and as Bush was extolling the virtues of 'freedom' and 'democracy', a journalist sitting in the centre of the third row suddenly got up, hurled his shoe at the president and screamed, 'This is a farewell kiss from the people of Iraq, you dog.'

Bush ducked as the first shoe went past his shoulder. The journalist then hurled his other shoe as al-Maliki tried to play a football goal-keeper to stop it from hitting the president. The shoe-throwing journalist now shouted, 'And this for all the widows and orphans you have created and for all the people who have died.'

Bush ducked this one too, and the journalist was roughly wrestled to the ground, beaten up and dragged away by security personnel. His screams of pain could still be heard as the press conference continued. Slowly, the screams turned silent.

When Bush recovered his composure, he added, 'That's an example

of “democracy”.’

Was it really? George Bush was completely unaware that the war he waged in the name of that word would still be raging in 2017. He was also unaware that the vast majority of people around the world were on the side of that journalist.

NARAYAN'S FINAL WORDS OF WISDOM

Narayan B. laughed as he recalled the story of the shoe-throwing journalist.

N: That was some gift. After Rongya told me about it, I saw the whole replay on television . . . That fucking Iraqi had guts. He hurled those shoes at the world's most powerful man and it was on television screens and newspapers everywhere, and the whole world was talking about it.

(Leans forward and says softly) But remember something: soon the story about the shoes will disappear from peoples' memories. They will forget . . . that's the way life is. We have created a world where people forget things very quickly. We really fucked up their minds so that they don't remember and that is good for us. This is my final lesson . . .

Pankaj nods thoughtfully. Narayan leans back, takes another sip of whisky.

N: Now enough of talking, go away. I am tired. Try drinking whisky sometimes.

P (getting up and smiling): I will, sir. I remember most of what you've said . . . maybe I'll do your story.

N: If you want to stay alive, don't do it.

Pankaj Patel didn't heed that advice. He had a great memory and the next

day he reproduced quite accurately most of what he had heard in an online magazine that was headquartered in New York.

Then Pankaj disappeared.

He was kidnapped on his way to the airport as he was about to return to the US. This happened one-and-a-half years ago. There was a huge hue and cry in the press and Parliament about what could have happened to him. Narayan B. was thoroughly investigated, but the CBI could not pin anything on him. Over time, news reports about the disappearance of Pankaj grew fewer. Then fewer still. Today, there are none.

Like I said, people have short memories. Or, is it the media that makes us forget with each new story fading to accommodate another, then another and another . . . who knows? Anyway, I have to move on.

Does a lie repeated often become the truth?

A VICTIM OF ITS OWN PROPAGANDA MACHINE

Today, the world knows that the Iraq War and its consequences were based on a lie. But the war itself had a strange beginning. Before sending in the troops, American air power and missiles 'softened up' the country by bombing Iraq's infrastructure, sewage systems, plants, factories, railway lines, army and air force bases and command posts for weeks. In all of this destruction, careful attention was paid to make sure the oil wells suffered minimum damage.⁷

Then, the American army entered the helpless and battered country for the final act. There were a few small skirmishes at Basra, Karbala and a more significant one at Nasiriyah, but by and large the resistance was negligible and quickly put down.

In the first two weeks, the reportage in American newspapers and television channels talked about how happy the people of Iraq were with the invasion forces, but there was very little photographic evidence to back the claim. Very few people came out on the streets with flowers and flags to welcome the invaders. In fact, quite a few Iraqi citizens shouted abuses at the troops who were completely surprised by this behaviour. They had repeatedly been briefed that Saddam Hussein was hated in his own country and was a brutal despot, and that the invading troops would be welcomed as heroes.

I must make a minor diversion here.

Does this mean that Saddam was universally loved in Iraq? No. I am sure that there were quite a few Iraqis who disliked him for all kinds of reasons. I, for one, disliked him for the dubious role he played in the war

against Iran in which he was backed by the West. But, being democratic, I would like to add that I disliked George Bush too and I am sure there would be quite a few American citizens who felt the same way. In fact, almost no country in the world has a leader loved by all its citizens.

Now back to my tale.

Finally, the invading troops entered the capital of Baghdad and what they found was an eerily silent city. Very soon the army commanders realised that they had no iconic images to tell the world that they had won. That Good had triumphed over Evil.

Then a tank commander along with armoured personnel carriers entered Firdos Square and saw an imposing statue of Saddam Hussein at the centre of it. He quickly messaged his boss for orders. It would be great if the statue could be brought down and the act televised and covered by the media, he said. Within minutes, an answer was given and the images that the world got to see will last a lifetime.

The tragedy of it all was that these images were manufactured.⁸

First of all, the nearby Palestine Hotel at Firdos Square was emptied of its approximately 200 foreign journalists. These journalists had witnessed and reported about the war from their hotel rooms because of the continuous bombings, and were now overjoyed to come out on the streets and get in on the action. The 'embedded' television crews with American troops also appeared on the scene. As the square was quickly encircled by American troops, tanks and armoured vehicles, a ragtag bunch of about forty to fifty Iraqi citizens emerged on the street.

There is still a great deal of speculation about the presence of these citizens. Some independent journalists said they were just curious Iraqis, others said they were rounded up by the troops, and some said they were followers of a dubious dissident leader.

These citizens were called in to surround the statue, and the television crews, photographers and journalists began to record the events.

But everyone had to be very careful. Except for the American troops, the tanks and the 200 foreign journalists, the television crews and this ragtag bunch of Iraqi citizens, Firdos Square was empty. The cameras therefore had to shoot all the action in close-up without revealing the emptiness or the other journalists or, if possible, the American soldiers.

What followed next was an incredible circus.

First of all, an American soldier on a crane draped an American flag on the face of Saddam Hussein. It was then revealed that the flag was upside down and the mistake was quickly corrected. Then some higher-up officer passed a rapid order and said the American flag looked like the symbol of an occupying army, so an Iraqi flag replaced the American one. All of this was happening in front of television crews and reporters.

American television channels, including CNN,⁹ were at the forefront of it all. They built up the drama beautifully as a cameraman recorded the arrival of a huge sledge-hammer, and when an American commander asked one of the Iraqi civilians present if he wanted to bring the statue down, the man dutifully nodded his head. He was given the sledge-hammer and, as the cameras began to roll, he had a go at the base but only a few bits of plaster and stone came off. But his effort was recorded. As soon as the cameras stopped recording, the man walked off.

Realising that bringing down the statue with a sledge-hammer would take a long time, a towing crane was brought in with a rope at the top end. The rope was tied around the statue and it was brought down as camera crews and photographers recorded the event.

As soon as the statue hit the ground, the motley crowd of Iraqis began to beat it with their shoes and slippers, and CNN announced to the world how happy the people of Iraq were at being liberated.

That is how media wars are sometimes conducted.

The flag hoisting, the bringing down of the statue and the chants of the ragtag mob as they kicked and pummelled the concrete image of Saddam Hussein became the iconic images of the Iraq War that the Americans so desperately needed.

CNN, Fox News and every major television network in American turned on the juice. The very next day, all the headlines in major American newspapers, including in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, were euphoric. A triumphant Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defence, likened those same images with the bringing down of the Berlin Wall.

Really?

Another person who believed this 'truth' was then president George

Bush. For him, the war was over and what remained to be done was just cleaning-up operations. It was the middle of the year 2003 and the war had lasted just about two-and-a-half months.

What no one told him was that the war had just begun.

It would grow into a full-blown Sunni insurgency that would last for years and then morph and continue with the rise of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish militias of all hues; it would lead to the arming of tribal vigilantes, the outsourcing of special powers to foreign security firms that operated as mercenaries, the entry of al-Qaeda and finally the rise of ISIS.

‘When will they ever learn, oh, when will they ever learn . . .’

A QUIET, CONCERNED INDIAN

His name is Harsh Mander and the first time I met him, he was a very young bureaucrat in the state of Madhya Pradesh. He took me around his district, which was populated mainly by tribals, and I got a first-hand experience of what a bureaucrat could and should do. Harsh was appalled by the conditions of the tribal communities, and even suggested I make a film to underscore what happens when they come into contact with the machinery of the government that was supposedly in place to look after their needs. Harsh was doing the best he could, but it was an unequal battle because of the entrenched interests of the local power elite, the officers of the state machinery and politicians who had other ideas.

In his bureaucratic career, Harsh was shunted from one posting to another as he battled right-wing communalists, self-enriching bureaucrats and other power elites who ignored the rights of tribals, Dalits, minorities and the dispossessed. He tried to persuade politicians to act, but they either didn't have the courage to confront these elements or preferred the status quo.

I still remember one act of Harsh's that got him into a lot of trouble with his higher-ups. Thousands upon thousands of people had died in the gas leak from the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal. Thousands more would be affected for life. It was in those early times that Harsh decided to act. He wanted the effects of this horrific incident to be recorded so that future generations would learn a hard lesson about what happens when governments allow hazardous industries to be located in densely populated regions. He contacted his immediate superior, another upright government officer, and sought permission to document the tragedy. Permission was given and the immediate aftermath of this immense

tragedy was recorded. But the documentary was quietly suppressed.

Harsh could not be reprimanded for doing his job, but the displeasure was not concealed. He was sent to the Administrative College at Mussoorie where young graduates were groomed. It was, perhaps, a move to get him out of the way in a system that didn't want to answer awkward questions.

That move did not deter Harsh from doing what he had to do. He made the most of his stint there too. As part of the programme, he began inviting social and political activists to speak and lecture to the budding bureaucrats. He invited writers, painters, film-makers and poets for dialogues with the students, all of who, in the future, would be very influential people.

Finally, after many years, Harsh left the administrative services and decided to go to battle on his own. For the last fifteen years or so, he has been fighting for the rights of the homeless and night-soil workers, raising funds to fight in the courts for minorities who have been displaced in vicious communal rioting, and for all those people who just need a helping hand. From writing books and articles, to speaking and touring, he has used every platform and opportunity to quietly express his point of view to anyone who is willing to listen.

I still remember an event I attended many years ago. I was addressing a group of young, recently graduated officers of the Indian Administrative Service, and asked one of them if he had any heroes that he would like to emulate.

Promptly, the young man replied, 'I would like to be like Harsh Mander.'

'Why?' I asked.

'People call him the messiah of the poor. I would like to be remembered like that.'

What follows next is a memory that most people are trying so hard to forget.

A TALE OF NO CONSEQUENCE

It was early January 1993 when Mumbai began to burn. My friends and I travelled around the city to see and document the mayhem and slaughter the thugs of a political party had unleashed on a hapless Muslim population. Quite a few Hindu unfortunates died too, butchered by Muslim thugs. I apologise for dividing deaths by religion, but when more than 90 per cent of the fatalities in a communal rioting are of people belonging to one community, anybody with any sense of balance would know it is a targeted massacre.

We visited the camps at Govandi, Jogeshwari and Antop Hill, and heard the stories of the people. It was heartbreaking, because they actually believed we could be of help as they recounted tales of slaughter, callousness, savagery. Once in a while, there were tales of hope and compassion, of help and protection extended from the 'other' side. The city was divided into 'us' and 'them'. Later, I travelled to other areas of the city, especially on the eastern side, and the sights I saw were horrific.

The official estimates revealed that more than 1,500 people were murdered. What the figure did not reveal was that whole neighbourhoods were destroyed, and the empty shells of burnt-down shops, trucks and workshops grimly sent out a loud and clear message to the minorities: it would take a long time for them to rebuild their lives.

The final grotesque act was when a series of bomb blasts ripped through the city and killed hundreds of innocent civilians. Two of the blasts were so huge that several buildings in the vicinity were reduced to rubble and body parts of human beings were splattered all over. It was sickening and also an act of random, indiscriminate reprisal. Behind this brutal retaliation was the hand of another thug: a Muslim underworld don

and his cronies.

I had read and heard stories of other communal riots in the north and west of the country, but this was first-hand experience of violence on this kind of scale. How had this happened? Why had it happened? How was a political party and its storm troopers given free rein to traumatise a city? The other thought that kept coming back to me was this: if this slaughter and mayhem can happen in the heart of the financial and entertainment capital of India, what will the future be like?

It will soon be twenty-five years since those ghastly events occurred in the city in which I was born. As my own memory begins to fade, the only image that remains vivid in my mind is of an elderly milk-man. He was on a bicycle and had tried to furiously peddle away to safety from a mob baying for his blood. The mob caught up and lynched him, and then burnt his bicycle and then trashed his milk cans.

I often wonder about the members of the mob who lynched him. Did any of them feel ashamed of what they had done? How did they sleep that night? What dreams did they have?

And then I think of the old man.

Who was he? Where did he live? Did he have children, grandchildren? What were the dreams that he had for them? On the day of his murder, did his children try to stop him from leaving home under such stressful circumstances? Did he have the choice of staying home for a few days till things calmed down? Did he not know how dangerous it was to go to work as riotous mobs were on the streets destroying everything that came onto their path? Did he not know that, for an uncaring administration, it did not matter whether he lived or died? And, finally, did he not know he was a man of no consequence?

The other greater tragedy about those terrifying days is when people today say, 'It happened a long time ago . . . we need to move on.'

Move on to what, I think.

Today I hear empty slogans as my prime minister thunders 'Terror is terror' and my home minister echoes the same thought by saying 'Don't give terror a religious colour'. It sounds so good because that's the way the law ought to be and its enforcers ought to think. I have no problem with the law. It's the enforcers that make me shudder.

Do they really think the way they ought to?

TALES OF HOPE AND SOLIDARITY

As Mumbai reeled under the onslaught of the communal rioting and bomb blasts of 1993, many stories also emerged that revealed that the city had not lost its soul. Hundreds of thousands of Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and others got together to help their fellow citizens in distress. I still remember visiting relief camps where food, clothes and blankets were distributed to those in need. I still remember the long lines of human chains formed by ordinary people and the long lines of people who gathered outside hospitals to donate blood to the seriously injured in the rioting and bomb blasts.

It was extraordinary.

But there is one tale that stands out in my memory. It was in the Cheeta Camp beyond the suburb of Chembur that I visited after the communal carnage had subsided. Cheeta Camp is basically a sprawling slum that houses a lakh or more people. The population is almost evenly divided between poor Muslims and Hindus. Most of the Hindus are either backward castes or scheduled castes. A very small percentage of poor Christians make up the rest. Most of the men are plumbers, electricians, auto and cab drivers, carpenters, mechanics and small shopkeepers, while the women-folk serve as maids and cooks in middle- and upper-middle-class neighbourhoods nearby. This sprawling slum had its own narrative to tell when the communal rioters reached its doorstep.

The rioters were stopped in their tracks.

The citizens of the camp had formed their own protection ring comprising volunteers of just a few hundred people belonging to all communities. They were lightly armed with clubs, staffs and steel rods. When the rioters arrived with their chilling communal war cries, the

volunteers moved forward to confront them and suddenly a strange thing happened.

The rioters turned tail and ran away.

This happened a couple of times, and the number of volunteers kept increasing. Each time the rioters withdrew, they cursed the Hindus of the slum for taking the side of the 'enemy'.

'Enemy?' muttered Naresh Yadav, a then twenty-year-old mechanic who was learning his profession under the tutelage of Mohammad Sheikh, an ageing master. 'Who the hell is an enemy? All of us live in this hell-hole of a city because we have no choice. Would we really want to be here if we could find jobs where we were born? These bastards who come here trying to create trouble between us are cowards. Their courage comes from the fact that they know they will not be picked up by the cops and given the treatment that we face when we get caught for even minor things. If they go through one fucking day in the lock-up with the cops belting them, they will shit their hate out.'

The large crowd, standing around Naresh at Cheeta Camp, smiled. I smiled too.

A VALLEY OF FEAR AND SORROW

I have visited the valley of Kashmir several times. The first time was in 1990, three years after the botched and rigged elections of 1987 that became the launching pad for an armed insurrection. I registered then the incredible and overtly manifested anger of the ordinary citizens of the valley. Since then, I have gone back at least five more times, and each time I visit the land, an incredible sadness overwhelms me. I see the faces in towns and villages there, and think of how, for more than twenty-five years, all that these people have faced is bloodshed and death. The tragedy of all these desperate years is manifested in the eyes and the half-smiles of the hundreds of Kashmiris I have talked to and interviewed.

This is the valley of Kashmir . . . the valley of unending sorrow.

There are too many people in India who will give you an opinion on why things are the way they are—terror attacks, sponsored Pakistan-trained militias, training camps for disgruntled Kashmiri youth, and so on. On the other side of the border, it is seen as a home-grown resistance movement against the brutal response of the Indian security forces and the insidious actions of the Indian intelligence services.

I am not a politician, a seasoned bureaucrat or a sharp investigative journalist to decode these charges. What I do have in my favour is that I have read and seen enough and, by adding some common sense, I believe everybody is involved. Caught in the mire of these charges and counter-charges are the people of the valley.

According to the *Hindustan Times*, which used data from official sources (which some say underplays the scale of the conflict), approximately 41,000 people have died in insurgency activities between 1990 and 2017.¹⁰ Most of the dead were militants, either home-grown or

from across the border, and the rest were civilians, security forces personnel and the police.

There is another aspect to this violence and blood-letting. More than half a million Kashmiri Muslims have migrated to other parts of India and to countries around the world to find some sort of peace.

The other, and more poignant tragedy of the valley is the mass migration of Kashmiri Hindus: more than 90 per cent hurriedly left their homes with just their bare belongings. What drove these people from a land that they had called home for hundreds upon hundreds of years? Why did they leave after being part of an intricate and inclusive social fabric for generations?

The answer to these questions could be many, but the single most important one was the ‘chants of the nights’. After the elections of 1987, many young Kashmiri Muslims felt cheated and crossed the border into Pakistan for arms and training. The Pakistani intelligence services welcomed this opportunity, and very soon a full-blown militant insurgency began, and by 1989, the Indian state sent in the army to quell it.

More and more militant outfits entered the arena as the intelligence agencies on both sides added to the chaos. It was a classic case: if an insurrection with a mass base occurs, the first step to take is to muddy the waters. Add your own groups and confuse the issue.

For Pakistan, it was an opportunity to seize and exploit. For India, it was to save the Republic. The blood-shedding had begun in earnest.

That is when the ‘chants of the nights’ began. Militant groups, some local and some Pakistan-sponsored, began raising their shrill, blood-curdling cries, specifically in the night, for maximum effect. The slogans were virulently Islamic, anti-Indian and exclusive. For the Kashmiri Hindu citizens, these were chilling messages that demanded they leave. In the light of the morning, they could no longer tell who was a friend and who a foe even among their lifelong neighbours. A fear had set in, and centuries of co-existence and friendships had ended.

According to the Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, about 400 Kashmiri Pandits were murdered between 1989 and 2008. In just the first two years of the insurgency, more than 200 were singled out and butchered. The message was loud and clear.

‘Get out!’ it said.

It is estimated that around 1,70,000 Kashmiri Hindus left their ancestral homes.^{[11](#)} Kashmiri Pandit organisations put that figure much higher. It was a sickening case of ethnic cleansing. Yes, there are still some Kashmiri Hindus who have not left the valley, and their presence is a reminder that once there was poetry in this land of fear and sorrow.

As far as the Muslim population of the valley is concerned, the poetry is over. All that remains is pain. And anger. As the Indian government claims that each election in Jammu and Kashmir is a vindication of the peoples’ will and a return to normalcy in the state . . . what is also visible is the shroud that has enveloped the land.

The shroud is not difficult to see if the eyes are clear and without prejudice.

SOLILOQUY

Sometimes I wish we had no boundaries between nations so that words like ‘national interest’, ‘patriotism’, ‘territorial integrity’ and ‘strategic assets’ would no longer be used to manipulate opinion, bludgeon dissent into submission, treat dialogue as a weakness, and, most importantly, camouflage more sinister and insidious agendas.

When and how did these terms emerge? Who defined them? I ask because strange thoughts are now crowding my mind. When the French proclaimed the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, what exactly did they have in mind? Did these words extend to the people in the vast swathes of lands that the French would soon colonise in West and North Africa? When the American Declaration of Independence proclaimed that ‘All men are equal’, did it include the thousands upon thousands of slaves coming to the land, and also the slaves that quite a few of these Founding Fathers had in their vast cotton, tobacco and farming estates? Crucially, did it also include the Native Americans who, over time, would be looted of their lands, decimated and almost made extinct?

Who was equal, who was not?

I even wonder about the men and women who wrote the Constitution of India. Did they demand too much of the ordinary citizens of our country? Were we worthy of those lofty ideals that they envisaged?

A WISE MAN IN NEW YORK

Five years ago, I passed a tiny shop in Greenwich Village, in New York City, that had a no-nonsense signboard above it that said 'Greenwich Locksmiths'. Just below this, an additional tag-line proclaimed: 'Master Licenced Locksmith Since 1968'.

I peeped into the dark interior to see a sixty-ish, hawk-faced man bent over a work-table and deeply engrossed in filing away at some small piece of metal. He didn't notice my presence. I don't know why I stopped to watch him, but having done so, I was transfixed—riveted by his deep concentration and the intensity of his gaze as he kept checking the metal object in his hand. I must have been watching him for a while when suddenly he turned his head towards the door and looked out. I felt incredibly stupid standing there on the sidewalk looking in. So, I smiled. Only, he hadn't noticed me because he rubbed his eyes for a moment and went back to work: he was just giving his eyes a much-needed break.

I surveyed his shop from the sidewalk. Framing the frontage was a chunky, eighteen-inch wide and half-inch thick metal mural that had some strange patterns on it. On closer scrutiny, I realised that the piece was made from melted locks and keys that had been hammered and shaped into an intricate design which, viewed from a distance, would not reveal its secrets.

Outside the shop, on the sidewalk and under a small awning, were two large cast-iron (or was it steel that had darkened over time to look like iron?) safes. Next to one of them was a metal chair for visitors, once again made from sculpted keys. The two windows, adjacent to the entrance, were scruffily functional with certificates, photographs, trade affiliations, membership affiliations and newspaper clippings plastered on them. The

entrance to the shop, considering the fact that it was the year 2010 in New York, was embarrassingly inelegant. In fact, the entire shop felt like it was stuck in a time warp: an age of innocence set in the age of excess.

What the hell was a shop like this doing in the awe-inspiring, wealth-creating and greed-producing, avant-garde art-making and rock-and-rolling, haute couturing and haute cuisining, hard news- and manufactured myth-making, name-dropping and celebrity-worshipping, state-of-the-art thinking and scandal-mongering capital of the world?

I just had to meet that out-of-place man in his out-of-place shop. Unfortunately, I was leaving for India the next day, but around two years later, I, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, film-maker, traveller and writer, would meet Philip Mortillaro, the Greenwich Village locksmith. What follows is a conversation we had in May 2013 at his shop on 56, 7th Avenue South.

S: Let's start with your family. Tell me about your parents.

P: My father came as an immigrant from Italy and my mother was from here. My father had a good job and my mother was a seamstress. Both of them worked really hard to raise a family.

S: How did you get into the lock business?

P: I was in high school and it all started when I was looking for a summer job when I was fourteen years old. All kids look for a summer job, you know. Someone told me there was a hardware store and they were looking for someone to help them move. It turned out it was not a hardware store; they were locksmiths. I kind of offered to help them move, and then worked there all summer long. When the summer was over, they asked if I wanted to go back to school or work with them and learn a life-long trade. I chose the life-long trade.

S: Why?

P: I got to like what I had learned. So, I started out as an apprentice at 14th and 2nd Avenue. By the time I was eighteen, I opened my own shop and

worked there till I was twenty, till 1970. Then someone offered to buy my shop. It was an open-air space that had a licence for ten years. He gave me 25,000 dollars for it. That was a lot of money . . . a lot of money! So, I decided to travel. I bought a car and I travelled all over the country: to San Francisco, Seattle, Idaho, Wisconsin . . . then I came back here and bought another shop. The one right here.

S: What did your father think about your move to quit school and learn a trade?

P: He didn't like it, he expected more from me.

S: Why?

P: It's tough changing the mindset of the poor immigrant. He works with his hands and he expects his children to go to college, work with their minds. My father never once visited my shop till the day he died.

S: That's a pity.

P: Yeah. He couldn't believe I could be proud of my work. Liking your work is one thing . . . to be proud of it is another. Let me tell you a story. I was about twenty-one years old and I got this call from a Japanese gentleman. He had a problem with a door that had come apart. Now to fix that sounds simple, but it was not. The door had the lock and hinge in the middle; most doors have it on the side. It was a complicated job, but I fixed it. The Japanese guy was surprised. You know what he said? He said, 'Yankee ingenuity.' Can you believe it? Yankee ingenuity! I felt so proud. And we Yankees did have ingenuity . . . we could make things, fix things. Look at us now. We can't do a damn thing with our hands. We've lost our respect for it . . .

S: When you say America has lost respect for people who work with their hands, is there a price being paid for that?

P: Of course there is. No one wants to work hard with their hands anymore. We've let the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans make things for us, and they do a damn good job of it. There is such an emphasis on kids getting a college education—a finance degree or study to be lawyer or a doctor—by the time they do so, many of them are up to their necks in debt. They become adults in trouble rather than children in trouble. Most of them don't get the jobs they want and end up in the mail room or some such hell-hole. (He takes a deep breath)

Let me tell you another story . . . I know this lady, her daughter didn't go to college and became a beautician because she wanted to. She worked hard and, five years ago, she bought her own shop. She did what she wanted to and now she's doing great—and earning more than most college graduates who start out in life with a debt on their heads.

S: Are you saying a college degree has no value?

P: No. What I'm saying is that it isn't everything. Can every kid with a college degree get a job that he really wants? It isn't possible. So many of them are miserable, jumping out of windows, getting into drugs. They think money is the answer. For me, work has to come first. Not the money. When I look at a job, I try to figure out how I am going to do it, what's the best way, how to get it right. Kids today think differently; they want to know how much it pays. They don't ask themselves what they'd really like to do . . .

S: How do you think all of this money mania happened?

P: The government and the media, they sold a dream. And everybody got sucked in. (Shakes his head) It's entered our bloodstream. Young kids today, they have a hard time talking to a person. They don't look you in the eye. They are constantly on their phones, on their iPads, on the internet. They are scared. They can't meet people. They don't meet people. They work at jobs they don't really like. They only get an identity when they buy a home they can't afford, when they wear a 1000-dollar

suit, 200-dollar sneakers or shoes—most of it on credit. That's the dream being sold by the media. Can all this shit give you an identity? Look at me. I have an identity in this old tee-shirt and this old pair of jeans, everybody in the neighbourhood knows me. They know Phil the locksmith.

S: Is Phil the locksmith happy?

P: You bet I am! I earn more than 100,000 bucks. I have had three wives, I have five children, two grandchildren. Isn't that the life of a happy man? I'm better off than most guys with degrees.

S: Do you always compare yourself with guys with degrees?

P: Not really, but sometimes I do, because I worry about where kids are heading today. Not just kids, adults too. I worry about what we've done to ourselves. Ever seen people on the streets? When they see a work of art or a piece of architecture that they like, they don't soak in the experience, they just take pictures and move on. They are in such a terrible hurry . . . fucking pictures. Can you believe it?

S (smiling): They have no time to stand and stare.

P: Yeah, I hope they have time to see the pictures they've taken.

S: How long do you think that people like you, who work with their hands, how long do you think they are going to last?

P: Depends on the part of the country. In other parts of the country, it will last for a little longer, over here I don't know. I don't even know if any of my kids will take over from me.

S: What kind of an America would you like to see?

P (pausing): Let me think. There were some things in the '60s that I didn't

like. I didn't like the Vietnam War. I didn't like the racism. If you were black in this country, you had to face a lot of shit. It's much better now. But the wars are still on, they're still happening, we are into too many wars.

S: Why?

P: I don't know. We are a violent country. Look at our movies, television, video games—there's a lot of violence out there. When we had the draft during the Vietnam War, people questioned why their kids were being sent. We questioned the war. We don't have the draft anymore. It was scrapped. So now we have an army that can't question, and many of our soldiers are new immigrants, so we promise them a green card after their stint. We promise them some kind of college education. Now they do four years in the army just so that when they get out, they can get to go to college or get a green card. So they go to fight . . . they have no choice.

S: It sounds very mercenary.

P: It is. It's sad but that's the way it is.

There is silence for a while.

S: Do you have any hobbies?

P (smiles broadly): Yeah, see that green shutter over there? (He points to a shutter that is on a side-street diagonally opposite his shop). That's my studio, lots of equipment out there.

S: What do you do at the studio?

P: I create my sculptures. It helps me relax. Okay, enough talking, I've got to get back to work.

I thank him and leave. Across the street, I pause and glance at the shop

once more. I see Philip the Greenwich locksmith hunched over at his out-of-place work desk in his out-of-place shop. He is back at work. I wonder if he will raise his head and look out. He doesn't. I smile and walk on.

Since that first meeting, Philip and I have become sort of friends and, whenever I am in New York, we talk about this and that. Occasionally his wife and son, Philip Jr., join us too, and we spend time shooting the breeze, as they say in the US.

... AND A WISE MAN IN INDIA

I was travelling in Karnataka and decided to take a small detour from the ancient temple towns of Aihole and Pattadakal to visit Hampi, the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire.

At about eleven in the morning, I walking down to the small artificial lake created by the Tungabhadra dam. There were hordes of tourists around. My first reaction was to leave and return later, but then I decided against it. As I made my way through the throng, I glanced up and saw a man in a saffron robe and vermilion marks on his forehead. He was seated in a tiny alcove created by an overhanging rock above. It was almost a cave but not quite. It wasn't deep, but had enough room for a person to lie down and just about find shade from the blazing sun. There was also enough room for a small bundle of clothes, which is exactly what the man had. He seemed to be staring into the distance, lost in thought.

The man seemed to be absolutely alone in this crush of people. But why did he seem familiar?

I was about to move on when the man's gaze shifted and he noticed me. He smiled.

'Don't you recognise me, sir?'

'I'm sorry. I don't,' I said, 'but you do look familiar.'

'We met about fifteen years ago . . . right here.'

I was still searching my memory, and then suddenly I placed him. It had been so many years ago when I first met him as a young wandering mendicant in almost the same spot where we now were. I was then shooting a documentary on fifty years of India's Independence, and had decided to traverse the country and talk to ordinary people to find out what they felt. It was the year 1997 when I first met him.

This man, then around thirty-five years old, had been travelling around the country for several years and visiting various pilgrimage centres. A lot of Indians do that, of course, but what made this man different was that he visited Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Jain and Sikh shrines with equal fervour. I had interviewed him then, and here he was, in 2012, smiling at me.

He was older, a little more gaunt, but still lithe.

‘How did you recognise me?’ I asked. ‘When we first met I had long hair, a long beard and I was much slimmer.’

The man smiled and replied, ‘That doesn’t change a person. It is what is in your heart that does.’

I was surprised by that answer, and asked, ‘Do you still travel as much as you used to?’

‘Oh, I travel much more.’

‘You’re looking fit and healthy,’ I offered.

‘It is because wherever I go people feed me with love.’

I smiled. ‘For how long will you be here?’

‘I will leave this afternoon. I am going to the temples of Pattadakal. I will spend the night there.’

‘And then?’

‘I will visit some Sufi shrines in Gulbarga.’

‘And then?’

‘Who knows, maybe I will travel to Odisha to visit some temples.’

We said our goodbyes and I walked on. I wondered about him. How did he travel across our vast country? He didn’t seem to have any money, but that didn’t appear to be a hindrance. Did he travel by bus or train? How did his fellow passengers treat him? He did say that people fed him with love . . . I smiled. I had just met a man who had found peace with himself and the world around him.

A HOME WITH A VIEW

It is a massive multi-storeyed building built on a hill in a very expensive Mumbai neighbourhood and it caters to the needs of just five people—the family of India's richest man.

Rumours have it that the first five floors are used as garages to accommodate an immense fleet of luxury cars. Some even contest this and say, no, it is the first ten floors. Since I have never been invited to visit this home, I don't know which figure is true.

It is also whispered that the staff employed to care for the family of five is more than a hundred. Some people argue that the figure is easily twice as much. There are stories about three banquet halls, thirty bedrooms, swimming pools, incredible works of art, two plush theatres for the viewing of films on state-of-the-art screens and other mind-boggling amenities. Finally, there is the most consistent rumour that claims that it is the most expensive residence in the world.

Cab-drivers, street vendors and others add to these legends: 'The faucets in the thirty bathrooms are made of gold.'

'How did he become so rich so quickly?' asked an angry cab-driver. When I said nothing, he asked, 'It is said he has the entire government in his pocket. Is it true?' I shrugged.

The other, rather cynical, yet popular rumour is that 'from the top floor', which is about 400 feet above street level, one could get a good view of the surrounding slums. I put all these rumours down to the jealousy of citizens who would have loved to visit this Xanadu. I have only one thing to say about it viewing it from the outside: as a piece of architecture, it sucks.

In the year 2015, as the monsoons lashed the city ferociously, this

particular building got a large chunk of unwanted attention from the rains. To protect itself huge sheets of blue tarpaulin and plastic were wrapped around the exterior—images of which went viral across the country. The tarpaulin and plastic were the same that slum-dwellers use to protect their homes. It was ironic.

In fact the subject of my next essay is how the aesthetics of an entire nation can change when a new economic and social system is put in place, where the ‘survival of the most crafty’ becomes the new gospel.

As I said earlier, who needs the lofty ideals of our Constitution anymore?

THE LUMPENISATION OF AESTHETICS

Ladies and gentlemen, let us now discuss the state of our minds, which is something that will determine how we live in the future. Let's talk about aesthetics. Now, I must confess that I am not an academic, and hold no degrees in aesthetic theory. I am a film-maker, writer, traveller and, hopefully, a thinker. I write and speak not as a trained sociologist or analyst, but as a concerned Indian who has spent his life dealing with the affairs of ordinary people.

Let me begin with the word 'lumpen'. It is a German word used to describe that section of society that was considered parasitic, living a life that was antithetical to what a nation would call 'productive labour'. In rapidly industrialising, nineteenth-century Europe, it would include beggars, thieves, street gangs, louts, the jobless, pimps, prostitutes and others not engaged in productive labour. In other words, 'lumpens' were perceived to be a threat to 'good governance'. I would also like to add that 'good governance' was a euphemism that actually meant governance that was good for the emerging robber-barons, which included industrialists, traders, merchant bankers and imperial colonisers who didn't give a damn about the rest of their citizenry so long as they could make windfall profits.

Over the next century, Europe and the rest of the world would move away from this easy categorisation of a large section of the populace, as sociologists, social anthropologists and philosophers recognised that the lumpen of our societies were the product of a distorted and iniquitous economic and political system.

In our times, though, I believe the word has also taken on a new kind of form. It now reflects a state of mind that extends far beyond its early

social boundaries to include large sections of the urban middle- and upper-income groups in India. And, what is this state of mind? Basically, it means that the first priority is self-preservation and to hell with the rest.

How did the middle-class get infected with this disease? There is a history to it.

Ever since Independence, the middle and upper-middle class had been the fulcrum of society, the keepers of tradition, and, by and large, they had a sobriety that had neither the despair of the poor nor the profligacy of the emerging oligarchs. However, over the last thirty years or so, I have seen a steady erosion of these very same qualities. This erosion dramatically increased when the country opened up to the idea of liberalisation and economic reforms in the 1990s. The middle class never anticipated what was to follow.

Launching the new aesthetics were land sharks, developers, corporate houses, think-tanks, wheeler-dealers, money launderers, political warlords, venture capitalists and the underworld. Along with these worthies came the multinationals, and the excesses of mindless consumption. In urban centres the most visible manifestation of this celebration of being finally free from the 'licence raj' of earlier times were magnificent malls, shopping arcades, lounge bars, multiplexes, night clubs, boutiques and theme parks. They were springing up all over the country. Backing this euphoric lifestyle was a blitzkrieg of film, press and television commercials that celebrated the nation's coming of age. Editorials in leading newspapers heralded India's leap into modernity. Beauty contests became front page news. Dozens of glossy magazines on fashion, food, fitness and health were launched. Mainstream cinema was not far behind in eulogising this new state of affairs. India was the happening place. The streets of Mumbai and Delhi were supposedly just a heartbeat away from those of Paris, London and New York.

What did large sections of the stoic upper-middle class do in all of this?

It got seduced.

It got seduced by all the goodies on display and began to party. It was almost as if, after years and years of abstinence, this solid block of sobriety had gone on a binge. The politicians, economists and planners behind the economic reforms applauded. What nobody realised was that

the centre of the nation had caved in. A barrier that kept things in check had been breached, and there was nothing to temper the onslaught of excess. The middle class relinquished its pivotal position and took on the same aspirations, ambitions and greed that symbolised the bourgeoisie.

I hasten to clarify that I have nothing against grand parties. And, most certainly, I have nothing against having a good time. I have nothing against tastefully decorated homes even—in fact, I have one. It's relatively modest, but nevertheless tastefully decorated. But I do have a problem with a blinkered existence that ignores and is far removed from the other yawning reality of another India: the India of the dispossessed and the disenfranchised, where *about 70 per cent live on less than two dollars a day*.

A few examples would help understand what I'm getting at, and I recognise that some readers might find them uncomfortable. But I am getting on in age, and if I do not speak my mind now, when will I do so?

Let us take the case of a famous stock broker. He died a few years ago and may his soul rest in peace. But when he was alive, he was manipulating shares, banks and ordinary investors, and making a personal fortune that ran into thousands of crores of rupees. When he was finally arrested, it wasn't just the financial whiz kids and other stock market brokers who thought he was a hero. Large sections of the middle class did too. I remember I had gone to the premiere of a friend's film and the biggest applause was reserved for him rather than the film stars who were present. Here was a man who had manipulated the stock market, was fundamentally a crook and he was being treated like a celebrity. It set me thinking. Why were they also applauding the con man?

Let us take religious festivals in our major cities: whether it is Diwali, Eid, Durga Puja, Navratri or Ganesh Chaturthi, and ask ourselves, which are the pandals that are the glitziest, play the loudest music and have the largest throngs of devotees? They are the ones sponsored by the leaders of our new aesthetics: corporate houses, real estate developers, political warlords, wheeler-dealers and the underworld. Everyone knows it and yet there is this incredible silence. Is it because no one gives a damn so long as a good time is had? Is it because we choose to look the other way?

Until recently, the main sponsor of the Indian cricket team was a

corporate house known for its dubious past and assets. It has also been slapped with a Supreme Court order to pay up a Rs 25,000 crore fine, and yet no one cares. The demi-gods in the team, built up so in the media, had the logo of that corporate house emblazoned across their shirts, and on their helmets was the flag of the Indian Republic. Did anyone see the irony of it all?

I can go on and on about the relentless onslaught on our sensibilities. But I have to reach beyond it. I have to try to understand what this unbridled consumerism, euphemistically called liberalism, has led to at the social and political level.

Strangely enough, rather than expanding, I believe it has blinkered and ghettoised large sections of the middle- and upper middle-class minds. The questioning, probing process that underpins our humanity has been replaced with a narrowness of vision that can be seen in the new and emerging political movements across the country. As the process of liberalisation goes deeper and wider, caste-based, religion-based, language-based movements are on the rampage.

Let us take a close look at our towns and cities. What do we see? I can describe to you the incredible lawlessness of construction that stares us in the face or the endemic corruption that has reduced them to festering slum cities. I could even tell you of the critical infrastructure that has actually collapsed or about the callousness that greets ordinary citizens as they enter overworked and under-equipped public hospitals, the courts and police stations. I could tell you about the brutalised existence of large sections of citizens whose living conditions are shameful and in stark contrast to a few oases of fine living. I could go on . . . but you know all of this.

Does this have a connection to what I said earlier? Whether we like it or not, I believe it does.

Which brings me back to the subject of the middle and upper-middle class in India. What is their mindset? I believe, to a large extent, it is euphoric at one end and compassionless and brutalised at the other. In other words: 'lumpenised'.

(This is based on a paper I presented at the Pune Biennale a few years ago.)

*‘Some are born great, some achieve greatness, some
have greatness thrust upon them.’*

–William Shakespeare

DEFINING A MASS LEADER

A few years ago, a political warlord passed away in the city of Mumbai and his funeral was covered by most television channels. What struck me about the coverage were two things that made me sit up and think.

The first was that there must have been at least 4,00,000 people who watched the funeral cortege pass by to the crematorium which was about five kilometres from his home. Most of the people in the huge crowd chanted slogans that reflected their admiration and devotion to the departed leader. In other demographically diverse neighbourhoods, there was silence as people watched from the streets and from apartment buildings. Then, as the demographic situation changed, the roar and the slogans of the crowds resounded once more.

The second was the coverage of one particular English television channel that kept telling its viewers that they were witnessing the passing away of a mass leader. The television anchor, known for his patriotism and nationalism, kept reminding the viewers that if anybody doubted the credentials of the departed leader, they had now better 'shut up', because the huge crowd on the streets was the final barometer of his 'greatness'. It was the ultimate proof of his legitimacy as a loved leader.

I am not questioning the fact that he was a mass leader; of course he was. The question is: why must this television channel demonstrate proof of it?

The answer lay elsewhere.

It started with a journey that began many years ago, and ended on the day of this funeral.

Here was a man who started a small newspaper that listed out grievances against outsiders in the city, especially south Indians, who

were taking up jobs that could easily be given to 'locals'. In a few months' time these questions were being asked by the locals themselves. A small fire had been lit and an idea took root that would have dangerous consequences. A few years later, the movement got added muscle power by being secretly supported by political warlords and big business as was explained by Narayan B., the gangster-philosopher in an earlier essay.

Soon this movement, backed by the requisite muscle power, became a political party. It began to flex its muscles, and Gujarati traders and south Indian restaurateurs were attacked. They were forced to buy their peace. Then it was the turn of the north Indians and Muslims and, for more than two decades, this political party violently and riotously held the city of Mumbai to ransom. The power and 'benefits' gained from the city allowed it to extend its influence in the rest of the state.

By the late 1980s, it had morphed into a legitimate political entity, and in the early 1990s, it indulged in a massive communal pogrom where hundreds of lives were lost. This targeted mayhem and slaughter was officially recorded by a commission of inquiry headed by a respected judge who indicted the party for its role in the blood-letting and carnage.¹² The report was quietly buried.

The mass leader smiled. He knew it had always been this way.

In the riotous and bloody historical journey of his party, almost every single noted industrialist, film star, sportsperson, socialite, journalist, cop and bureaucrat had genuflected . . . nay grovelled before him. The lesson that all these worthies had learnt was that he was not going to be held accountable for anything. He was above the law and the Constitution of the land.

Yes, mass leader he was, and there is no question about it. His life and death also reflected where we had reached as a nation.

ANOTHER MASS LEADER TAKES CENTRE STAGE

He is short and reminds you of a clerk in a government office buried under piles of files. He dresses atrociously; his voice is scratchy and he coughs in between sentences to clear his throat. Lately, he has also taken to wearing spectacles, and somehow that makes him look even more ordinary.

And yet.

And yet, in 2015, this same man led a revolt, along with the assistance of a large group of idealistic people, that stopped the mightiest and most viciously divisive political machine that India had ever seen in its tracks.

I shall attempt to explain his momentous historical journey in telegraphic form.

For a long time after India gained its Independence, there was only one truly national political party. In political terms, it contained within itself a coalition: a few sections of right-wing politics, large sections of middle-of-the-road politics and then some socialists. It had something for everyone.

Over the years, this party turned complacent and manifestly corrupt, but still believed that the people would vote them in because they were the ones who led the fight for the country's freedom. As this state of affairs continued with a few major and some minor hiccups, the party didn't realise that another force, right-wing and virulently divisive, was emerging from the wings. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, after a series of incredibly violent communal riots, it took centre stage too, and for the last two decades, these two political parties, along with their regional allies,

took turns to rule the country.

When the grand old party assumed power once more in 2004, the stories of its financial irregularities began to appear through leaked documents, and both the press and television channels had a field day exposing the high levels of corruption. It seemed almost orchestrated because scams and wheeling-dealing, barring the left parties, was a way of life with almost every political outfit in India.

Nevertheless, in the year 2011, an ageing, reclusive Gandhian launched a protest against this state of affairs. One of the people who practically forced him out of retirement to lead this movement and be its mentor is the protagonist of my essay. He and his group of impassioned friends launched an amazing agitation that would soon resonate across the country for several reasons.

For one, people believed in the mentorship of this elderly man and his life of exemplary simplicity. Secondly, the group of people who had started this movement were not typical politicians. They were concerned citizens asking a simple question: what kind of country did we want for ourselves and for future generations? At the centre of this emotional appeal for change was my protagonist who, through his incredibly unaffected appearance, scratchy voice and cough, in a strange way, epitomised the common man.

As the movement against corruption grew, as people railed against the state of affairs, the Election Commission of India announced the dates of the next parliamentary elections: it was scheduled for 2014.

My protagonist and his party decided to enter the fray. It was seen as an opportunity.

Realising that the movement against corruption had struck a deep chord among people, the right-wing political party also sensed an opportunity to seize power. So, backed by media barons, big industrialists and financiers, it entered the fray too and put up a candidate to lead the assault. He was a man who had been carefully portrayed as an iron-willed, strong man who could get the country out of the mess it was in.

Let us call him The Face.

So, when the elections began The Face was seen, heard and even virtually recreated everywhere. The media in all its dimensions, including the internet, followed his journey and rapturously reported on the huge

crowds that greeted him and held on to his every word. He would make India great again; he would eliminate corruption; he would bring in development for all; he would be the champion of the poor. He was the mythical hero that the people of India were yearning for.

Meanwhile, my protagonist and his party colleagues vowed to fight both the heavyweights head-on. They fought the elections on several issues: corruption and communalism; justice for all; inflated electricity and water bills that targeted the poor and disenfranchised; and on how our Constitution had been usurped by the rich and powerful. They even called their movement the beginning of the second struggle for Independence since the first one had run its course.

When the results were announced the new party did well in certain pockets, but mostly failed. However, what surprised people of the city and the country was that, despite having limited funds and an organisation of unskilled if eager volunteers, the new party had created an impact of considerable importance. It had become a minor force for change in a sea of entrenched and cynical power structures.

So, when the date for the assembly elections in Delhi was announced, my protagonist and his group of impassioned companions entered the political fray once again.

Both the established political parties were shocked by the arrogance of these upstarts. The grand old party believed that this new 'bunch of anarchists' would split their vote share and hand over power to the right-wingers on a platter. The right-wingers strongly believed that they would crush these 'little guys', because in the earlier elections they had won all the parliamentary seats that the city of Delhi had to offer. These assembly elections would be a cake-walk for them with The Face as their leader, armed with his aura of being invincible, decisive and strong.

But my protagonist and his friends had an ace up their sleeve. In the earlier election, their volunteers had spread themselves too thin, across several states, and had no experience of mobilising people. This time around it was a question of just one city, Delhi, and they strongly believed that their mass base in the capital of the country was formidable.

It was.

Besides, thousands of supporters both in Delhi and from around the country arrived to help. It was amazing to see these idealistic and

committed volunteers campaign from door to door, visit middle-class neighbourhoods and make thousands of friends over cups of tea. Most importantly, these volunteers spent most of their energy in the poorer areas of the city and its slums.

When the results of the three-way contest were announced, the upstarts had won the most seats. It shocked the city and the country. Suddenly, an idea for real change became a reality and people could sense it. The biggest celebrations were held in the slums, poor and middle-class neighbourhoods. In a strange way, the people in these areas believed it was their victory.

And, it was.

Now there was a political dilemma. The new party did not have the required number of elected representatives to rule on their own. The grand old party offered to help, and were duly refused. Although the new party assumed power without the support of any political outfit, it soon realised that its hands were tied. Without the requisite number of representatives, the entrenched opposition guaranteed that they could not pass any resolutions. There was another, and bigger, political problem too. The police force and Municipal Corporation of the city were under the command of the Central government, with The Face as its leader. How was the new party to fulfil its promises then?

The Ordinary Man and his group did the best thing they could do.

They decided to tell the people of the city about their dilemma. It was a case of direct democracy, and the response from citizens was, to say the least, astonishing. For the first time in the history of my country, a political party had taken the people into confidence and, having received massive approval, proceeded to dissolve their government and call for fresh elections and a fresh mandate.

This is the stuff of what democracy should be. Trust the people, tell them your problems, engage in a dialogue with them—and listen to them. People will forgive mistakes if the intentions are honourable.

As the government dissolved, the combined opposition sneered. They once again called the new party leadership a ‘bunch of anarchists’ and said they were unable to rule. They also called my protagonist a coward who ran away from his duties.

The date for fresh elections was announced, and this time The Face

and his party were taking no chances. They had seen the results of the earlier confrontation, and so the financial war-chests were opened liberally, and the city was blanketed with hoardings, billboards and posters. Newspaper and television channels covered their campaigns, walkathons and briefings thoroughly. The grand old party did get a semblance of coverage too. The new party got almost none, and when there was a mention, it would be, more often than not, a jibe. The coverage was so one-sided that a joke doing the rounds across the country was that since there was no opposition, why hold an election?

Two days after the elections, the final results of the new referendum were announced. The little party had swept the polls with almost 93 per cent of the seats!

It was absolutely incredible and I was elated. The year was 2015, and I was amazed at what could be achieved, and under such trying circumstances. All my cynicism about the state of affairs evaporated.

Another kind of mass leader was born.

He had taken on the money power of the big industrialists and he had confronted the virulent divisive forces, their hate speeches and overheated jingoism and had successfully exposed the hollowness of an entrenched and cynical political system. Crucially, he had exposed the chinks in the armour of The Face.

All this had been achieved because a close-knit band of people of incredible integrity had come together to create history. A country had woken up and taken note.

In all of this, it was my protagonist who was the accepted leader. And it was to him that people had turned to for leadership.

Postscript:

There is however the sad news that followed this historic victory: the group of comrades, at the core of the party, broke up bitterly. It was sad to see these wonderful people with such integrity end up this way. The millions upon millions of people, not just in the city of Delhi but around the country, who stood by them and believed in what they represented are probably still desperately praying for some form of reconciliation.

Nevertheless, the story of this victory revealed all kinds of possibilities. It gave us hope that words like decency, inclusiveness, sharing, brotherhood, compassion and unselfishness still had meaning.

This is what a mass leader should be.

A METAPHOR

A wise man was reading a book in a park when an information nerd and his friends barged into his space and confronted him.

N: People say you are a wise man. Are you?

M: I don't know if I am.

N: Then why do people say you are?

M: I don't know.

N (exasperated): Can I ask you a few questions for my edification?

M: Please do.

N: Who won the Battle of Waterloo?

M: I don't know.

N: Who won the First World War?

M: I don't know.

The friends smirked.

N: Do you know who won the Second World War?

M: No.

N: It seems you know nothing about these wars.

The wise man shrugged.

N: I know everything about these wars.

M: What do you know?

N: I know the names of every military general who participated, of every strategy that was planned, every piece of military equipment that was used, and even the dates of every single battle. Every single detail!

M (smiling): That's very good. I suddenly remembered that I do know something about these wars.

N (sneering): What do you know?

M: Soldiers on all sides died.

JINGOISM IN THE TIME OF DENGUE

I believe that the best time to measure the role and integrity of the media of a country is when it prepares for war. I don't like wars nor do I trust the reasons given for why they occur and that is where the role of the media comes in. What I have noted carefully is that in these frenzied and 'patriotic' times, the questioning, probing and rational role of the media gets switched off and sober analysis is replaced, very often, by manufactured hysteria. I have seen enough of such emotional manipulation around the world in my life to make me nauseous. The classic example of such dereliction of duty was the role that most of the Western media played in promoting the lies and deceit that led to the invasion and devastation of Iraq.

I have used this example to try and understand the role of the media, in both India and Pakistan, over the recent attacks in India that have taken the lives of Indian security forces and our covert and calibrated retaliations that have, I am sure, also taken lives across the border. The media response to all of this has been shrill and volcanic on either side, and the out-of-proportion coverage of incredibly bigoted speeches of some individuals in both countries has added fuel to a highly volatile situation. What we have are two heavily armed nuclear powers at each other's throats.

All it requires is a demagogue to set fire to this combustible mix.

I am no expert on Pakistan, although I do know it has some deep and complex problems. I have gathered that there are ethnic divisions between the Pathan, Punjabi, Sindhi, Baloch and Mohajir communities and that country's relationship with its neighbour Afghanistan is tenuous. I also know that there is a major problem of unemployment and there has been a

massive decline of manufacturing in the country. Adding to these woes, it seems that there is almost a civil war between the Pakistan army and some sections of tribes in the North West Frontier Province. On another front, there are other armed militant, sectarian and fundamentalist organisations that regularly carry out savage attacks across the country and the death toll in these attacks is horrifying. It almost seems like no one is in control.

Having said this, I am not surprised by this state of affairs because I believe there is a long history to this devastating legacy.

I believe it all began with the choices the nation made early on at the time of its formation when it joined the Western Alliance during the Cold War. Pakistan became a junior partner to the US and it was nurtured as a counter-weight to India which was then perceived as being pro-Soviet. This suited the Pakistani army well because the armaments the country received through this partnership allowed it to take centre stage and have a major voice in the affairs of state; the civilian democratic institutions, including political parties, were reduced to being minor players. The joke doing the rounds in the late 1970s was that Pakistan was run by Allah, the army and America.

This suited the army and America, although I'm not sure how Allah felt about it.

For the Pakistani army, this relationship served its insatiable need for weapons to keep its arch-enemy, India, at bay, and it was also a source for lucrative kick-backs for the top brass in armament deals. In fact, over the decades, the army as an institution became an industry unto itself.

As far as the Americans were concerned, it was easier to deal with the army than pesky civilian leaders who asked awkward questions. In fact, they often helped the army remove inconvenient political leaders and, despite all their talk of democracy and freedom, they knew exactly who served their interests better. So, fundamentally, in their relationship with the Americans, the Pakistani army and intelligence services were like junior partners. And the civilian leadership of the country accepted its role as being subservient to the army.

However, over time, Pakistan, especially its army, chafed at this one-sided relationship. It wanted a bigger role for itself; it was no longer happy being a bit player.

The opportunity arose when the Soviet army entered Afghanistan at

the behest of the Afghan government, which was battling a sponsored insurgency. Since the West had funded the uprising, Pakistan, with its strategic location suddenly found itself in the spotlight. It would be in the frontlines of this battle and it seized the opportunity with relish.

Very soon the US and Pakistan armed and trained militias and groups of all kinds: Islamic fundamentalists fighting the godless communists, genuine resistance fighters, drug warlords, feudal tribal chieftains and mercenaries from around the world. It was a deadly cocktail, and the Pakistani army and intelligence services were in the thick of things. The country was used as a training ground for these 'freedom fighters' before they entered Afghanistan, and also as a haven for fighters to return to, regroup and then launch fresh attacks. One such 'freedom fighter' was Osama bin Laden.

As a consequence of all these secretive shenanigans, the country's border with Afghanistan was awash with sophisticated arms and missiles, thousands of mercenaries, special service commandos, spies of all hues and a flourishing drug trade. When the Soviet army departed, most of the Americans left, except for some of their special forces and intelligence services personnel. Pakistan was left to handle these heavily armed, trained and battle-hardened militias.

For more than a decade, various militias and alliances would jostle for power in Afghanistan, with various outside powers, including Pakistan, India, Iran, the US and Russia supporting one faction or another. It was a decade of mayhem and death. Pakistan, aided by the US, finally unleashed the Taliban, which seized power rather quickly, and the country found some semblance of stability. There was still some opposition to them, but by and large the Taliban were in control.

The Pakistan army heaved a sigh of relief. Things were going well for them and they were almost an equal partner of the superpower . . . almost.

However, things changed dramatically in 2001, when the US declared its War on Terror, and Pakistan had to prove its credentials by attacking those same groups that it, very often along with the US, had trained, armed and nurtured as 'freedom fighters'. Quite a few of them would now be called terrorists.

As the Americans, along with NATO forces, overthrew the Taliban

from Kabul, all hell broke loose. By and large, most of the militias, drug lords and mercenaries could not fathom the changed circumstance as they were bombed, droned and violently attacked by the American war machine. Pakistan was trapped in the middle and had to send in its regular troops to battle its own citizens and its trained protégés. Its government and army had been given no choice . . . it had to prove its credentials of being an ally or live with the fear of being branded otherwise.

The net result was all these militia—genuine resistance fighters, mercenaries and Islamic fundamentalists—now began to view the Pakistani army and government as American stooges on whom they would exact their revenge. To counter this situation, the Pakistan intelligence services and army would use some of these groups to attack India to try and deflect their anger.

This in very broad brushstrokes and without the sophistry of words that political pundits use is the legacy of Pakistan. It tried making the foreign policy of the US its own and is now paying a horrific price.

In all of this, what is the Pakistan media doing? By and large, it has been concentrating its attention and hysteria on India. There is very little introspection about the causes that created this mess in their country.

What about the frenzy in my own country? Ever since the ghastly Uri attack, in which many of our soldiers died, most of our mass media have made furious calls for military action and retribution. Some have even suggested full-scale war.

I am, of course, fully aware that my country has been the victim of horrendous acts of terror sponsored by Pakistan's intelligence services or militias backed by them. The attacks on the Indian Parliament, the devastation in my hometown of Mumbai, and the attacks in other towns and cities are examples of activities that have all added up to the anger we experience in our media today.

But a question still needs to be asked: does our media actually believe that we are innocent of any surreptitious activity in Pakistan? Any self-respecting and informed journalist will tell you that our intelligence agencies have also similarly responded by stirring up issues in Balochistan, Sindh and elsewhere, and the consequences of these acts have been quite devastating. It's a game of tit for tat.

Why do we play innocent? We have questioned the insidious role

that the intelligence services of Pakistan have played in India. We have also questioned the role of Islamic madrasas in Pakistan that sometimes can, and have, become breeding grounds for fundamentalists. We scream and shout about all of this to ourselves and to the world. Have we ever questioned the indoctrination and rise of right-wing fundamentalist forces in our own country?

It seems that large parts of the mainstream media in both countries are pushing us into a war-like situation.

But there is also a vast constituency of ordinary Indians and Pakistanis who have begun asking questions and these questions need urgent answers. For instance, why can't there be peace between our countries? Do we always need such a volatile climate along our borders? Is the Kashmir issue really not solvable?

In other words, what they are saying is something very simple. War is easy. It takes our attention away from the growing and alarming unemployment on both sides of the divide. It side-lines issues like affordable housing, quality education and healthcare for the rising number of poor and disenfranchised. It deflects attention from rising prices, inflation, the agricultural crises and the collapse of small and medium-scale manufacturing industries.

Peace is a damn sight more difficult because it means taking on the responsibility of good governance.

THE MAN WHO SPINS TALES

P. Sainath and I have been friends for many years, but the tragedy is that we only meet occasionally despite the fact that both of us live in the same city. I know he travels a lot, and so do I. But I keep track of his work and I am aware that he has spent half a lifetime travelling across India, into the most distressed regions, trying to understand and unravel the complex social and economic dynamics in small towns and villages. His powerful book *Everybody Loves a Good Drought* is a savage critique of the entrenched forces of greed and manipulation that have undermined the democratic and political rights of ordinary citizens in rural India.

Since then, P. Sainath has written powerful and eloquent articles on the precarious state of agriculture in the country and on the condition of small farmers as thousands of them commit suicide every year. He has won numerous national and international awards for the rigour and tenacity he brings to his work, and his essays indicting the policies of organisations like the World Bank and the consequences of globalisation on the most vulnerable and marginalised people have been eye-openers not just to urban Indian scholars but also to concerned citizens around the globe.

Nevertheless there was a question that bothered me: was Sainath reaching out to ordinary students or was his work limited to just scholars in the academic world?

Then one day my wife told me a story.

She had attended one of Sainath's talks in a prestigious Mumbai college. There was a large group of young students, mostly from very privileged urban backgrounds who had arrived at the hall. My wife was surprised by this large turnout. Was there a catch somewhere? Although a

few of them were vaguely aware of Sainath's writings, most were not. Then why had they come, she thought to herself. The answer was revealed a little later, just before the class, when some students frankly told her that they were attending this talk only because it was part of their examinations and they would later be asked questions on what they had heard. One student actually told her that he would rather be elsewhere than attend a boring talk on village life. The other students smiled and nodded.

The lights dimmed in the convocation hall and Sainath strode to the lectern.

He started by telling the students tales and legends of the Roman Empire and how various emperors had contributed to its growth and its mystique. The students were surprised by this introduction . . . they were expecting some serious academic stuff about research and analysis. Sainath then moved on to the escapades of Emperor Nero. He told them about his idiosyncrasies, and about the grand orgies and feasts that he held for his guests. The students were not expecting a talk like this by this serious intellectual and within minutes he had grabbed their attention. They were slowly drawn into his net.

Then Sainath went on to tell them a particular story that was recorded by a Roman historian of those times.

It was the record of a grand feast where hundreds of guests had gathered to partake both in the food and the orgy. Soon, however, it was going to get dark and Nero had a secret plan that was going to light up the place. How could anyone partake of a feast in the dark? Besides, the traditional wax and oil torches were passé and something new had to be thought of and Nero had just the right idea.

He had dozens of slaves brought into the palace and to the gardens outside. The guests were surprised as the slaves were quickly hog-tied by ropes, doused in oil and strung up on posts strategically placed for maximum effect. The slaves were then set on fire, and as they screamed in agony, the feast continued.

There was a stunned silence in the lecture hall.

Sainath then quietly continued with his class. One could understand the actions of Nero, he said, because he was considered an insane megalomaniac. The question that really needed to be asked was about the guests. How had they participated in such cruelty?

The students looked at each other silently . . . then at Sainath.

Sainath smiled. He then went on to draw a parallel between his story and the grand feast that the rich and powerful are having in our own country today, and how most of us are standing by and watching, perhaps even envying the proceedings. He spoke for another half an hour about his work, his research on the actual conditions in rural and semi-rural areas, and the cynical attitude of state administrations as they looked the other way or actually feasted on the despair of the marginalised millions. The students listened in silence.

When he finished, many students gave him a standing ovation. The others filed out from the hall, deep in thought. It must have given some solace to Sainath who once famously declared, 'I keep on writing, but is anybody reading what I write?'

‘It is easy to find men, O King, who always speak what is only pleasant to hear. But one willing to speak, or listen to what is wholesome, though unpleasant—Ah! That man is hard to find!’

—Panchatantra

NATIONS AND MYTHS

I will now move on to the subject of myth-making and nations. The reason for doing so is because I believe that myths are barriers that thinkers and activists like Harsh Mander and P. Sainath have to contend with to reach out to their audiences. So often these barriers become impenetrable walls. For instance, how can the violence and intolerance manifestly pervasive in our society be presented to an audience that largely perceives itself and the nation as being spiritual, tolerant and non-violent?

It's tough to break through the clichés and this kind of myth-making is not unique to India.

So, I decided to write a few short pieces about some countries that have created their own myths and projected them successfully. Are these myths necessary? Would these countries be better off if they faced the truth about themselves?

A classic example of facing up to an ugly reality was the Truth and Reconciliation trials in South Africa initiated by Bishop Desmond Tutu. The trials were organised to hold up a mirror to South African society about the grotesque excesses of apartheid that, so often, led to murder, humiliation, torture and massacres. Both sides participated and revealed their covert and ugly secrets. I still remember some of the heart-wrenching stories of torture and brutality that were telecast around the world. Was the opening up of these wounds really necessary?

I believe it was.

The trials may not have erased the gross inequalities between blacks and whites that exist in the country even today, but it did send out a strong message. It might take a little time to achieve the change you desire, but it is a damned sight better than living under false delusions.

FRANCE

The one that got away

I've often wondered about France. I have spent time in that country. My films have been honoured there and, yet, I intuitively feel a latent racism despite the country's ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

It started when I was in Paris in the early 1980s. I noticed how people walked on the pavements of the city and realised there were two distinct sections. There was the Paris of the white French and the Paris of the immigrant, mainly North and West African. In the Paris of the white, there was a palpable celebration of life, art and culture. There were museums, theatres, cafés and fine restaurants. In this Paris, the white French strode in the middle of the pavement and with confidence. In this same Paris, the North Africans seemed to hug the walls, their walk tentative.

At first, I thought this was an aberration, but then I began to notice it occurring much more often. It set me thinking. In the cafés of this Paris, I began to notice how people sat. There was an openness and camaraderie at the tables where the white wine and dined, while North Africans sat huddled at their tables, and there was often this nervous quick glance over the shoulder. I got the same feeling at bus stops. It was only when I visited the other Paris, the neighbourhoods where the North Africans lived, that I saw the difference. There was no more hugging of the walls, the shoulders had opened out and there was free-flowing music and laughter.

Then in 1985 or 1986, I was offered a project in which a French filmmaker would make a documentary film on Bombay, while I would do one on Paris. I agreed. When asked about my subject of interest, I promptly said the Paris of the Algerians.

The project got no further.

Now, the reasons could be many, and I grant the agency I liaised with the benefit of the doubt, but this story does lead us to the area of myth.

Is there a myth about the occupation of France during the Second World War? What really happened? We all know about the Vichy regime that collaborated with the Germans. We also know about the Free French Forces under Charles de Gaulle who heroically fought the Nazis. Most importantly, we are aware about the internal opposition to the occupying

German army: the famous French 'La Résistance'.

The Resistance was that moment of glory and sacrifice that so many Frenchmen were proud of because, through it, they could somehow retrieve a lost dignity. It provided them with ideas of not cowing down, of fighting against a genuinely evil empire, of regaining humanity. And, because of the Resistance, the nation could go back and bask in the sun after the war. It could create avant-garde cinema, get back to wine-making and exquisite cuisine, and discussing culture and fashion, and Sartre and Camus, Foucault and Fukuyama.

So far so good.

Then a documentary film was released in 1969 that changed everything. It was called *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

It was a rigorously researched film that showed how French citizens by and large acquiesced to the occupation, and quite a few of them even collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. Not just the Vichy regime but also ordinary Frenchmen. There were butchers, bakers, candle-stick makers, businessmen and priests. The film created a furore in the theatres where it was screened, and there were tears and screams and laments. People booed and shouted and tried to stop it from being shown, but the truth was out. Despite the fact that the film is not discussed today, deep down it must have struck a chord somewhere that made many Frenchmen cringe.

So, was the Resistance a fake movement?

No, it was not. It was an organised opposition spearheaded by leftists, which fought the Germans and their collaborators. Also joining in were liberals and ordinary Frenchmen who just hated the ideas of Nazism. And there were quite a few of them. Unfortunately, there were not enough. The rest kept quiet. Or, they collaborated. The French needn't be ashamed of it. It happens in most countries. The French are not unique.

And because the French are not unique, they do things that other people do. Like what the French army and intelligence services did in the Algerian War of Independence. Many years ago, Benjamin Stora's *Gangrene and Oblivion: Memory of the Algerian War* rigorously documented the brutal torture and humiliation of thousands of Algerians. It is ghastly what man can do to man.

I am not being a racist in reverse. I know that the same methods, perhaps even worse ones, are also used by regimes in Asia, Africa and

Latin America. And even in India. What I'm getting at is that the French and other nations of the so-called West are not unique. Given moments of crises, or circumstance, their veneer of civilisation gets stripped away and a raw nakedness is revealed just below the surface. And the nakedness gets an extra edge when dealing with the 'inferior' peoples.

ITALY

The Keystone Fascists

I like Silvio Berlusconi. He was the leader of Italy for a long time, and lived a somewhat scandalous life that made headlines the world over. That is not the reason why I liked him, though. What I really admired was the way he spoke. He was blunt, and his statements very often revealed what he genuinely felt. Sometimes, this created an international furore. Then, forced by diplomatic propriety, he would retract what he had said. He would retract, but, in his own inimitable way. His mouth would say 'I'm sorry', but his face would say 'I'm not'.

Some time ago, in the beginning of the US-led War on Terror, he called the Arabs uncivilised. Then he retracted just the way I thought he would. Now I am not here to make a case for the Arabs. In fact, quite a few leaders in the Arab world live in a time warp and could easily be called all kinds of names. But my essay is on Italy. So, let's talk about the history of Berlusconi's country in the not-too-distant past.

After the Second World War, while the Germans got all the attention for their misdeeds, both as individuals and a nation, the Italians got away with barely a glance. Their thugs were treated as Keystone Fascists by the rest of the world. They were treated like pranksters really, who would rather have made pasta. Probably Mr Berlusconi and most of the people who vote for him believe this too. It's a great myth.

The people who did take the fascists seriously though, and paid a price for it, were the colonised Ethiopians, Libyans and Somalians, who were bombed and poison-gassed from the air. They were also strafed and machine-gunned during the reign of Mussolini. And the total estimate of the slaughter was about 5,00,000 people. But then who cares? They were African anyway; uncivilised.

The other people who took the Italian fascists seriously were a sizeable number of Italians themselves. They called themselves Partisans. It was a movement basically led by communists. I underline 'communists', because I believe they have got a raw deal in the writing of war history by the Western press.

So, the Partisans led by the communists, along with the socialists, liberals and many other ordinary Italians, fought the fascists and were also slaughtered by the hundreds. The Italian press was muzzled, storm troopers called the Black Shirts roamed the streets of the major cities and savagely crushed all opposition. Kangaroo courts were held and people sent to the firing squads. Poets, writers and artists were put in jail and so many of them were forced to migrate. Those were very dark times, and when the Partisans finally caught up with Mussolini, they strung him up in a market square.

Advice to Berlusconi: I know you wear expensive designer suits and shirts and your shoes are of the highest quality in leatherware. I am also sure the same goes for the quality of your watches, socks, ties and everything else. All of this makes you look good. And I am sure it makes you feel good. If you add your expensive cars, your palatial homes, thriving businesses and your erotic parties, you must be feeling so much better. However, I would like to add that it takes a damn sight more than all of this to become civilised.

ISRAEL

Biblical baloney

I have been following the Middle East conflict for many, many years. But it was only twelve years ago that I actually got the opportunity to visit Israel and Palestine. I spent about three weeks travelling in and around Jerusalem, Hebron, Ramallah, and I also saw a bit of Tel Aviv. What amazed me was that even in this brief stay, the difference in the mindset of the two peoples was so clearly apparent.

The Palestinians were, by and large, angry, sullen and often quietly ironic. Even their celebrations had an inexplicable quality of sadness. I remember telling an Indian friend that, while I saw a struggle to find

purpose and a sense of getting on with life on the faces of the young Palestinian women, on the faces of the young men I only saw a willingness to die.

It shook me.

On the other side, I saw Israelis in restaurants and shopping malls. It seemed like they just lived for the moment. There was a sense of urgency in their laughter and camaraderie. And their celebrations had a tinge of assertion, of their right to be where they were. It was a kind of back-to-the-wall justification, because so many of them were recently arrived immigrants, or sons and daughters of immigrants. And rarely, very rarely, did I see a Palestinian in their midst.

I saw young Israeli soldiers at numerous checkpoints who looked at the 'other' but did not actually see. The meeting was curt and dismissive. No eye-contact. Why? Was it perhaps too painful? I hoped so. Because these checkpoints were on Palestinian land, and the soldiers knew it. Everyone seemed to be trapped in their separate worlds. It was a frightening historical irony.

I was witnessing apartheid. And I believe, optimistically, that nobody wanted it.

Am I saying apartheid? Exercised militarily, economically and socially by the very same people who should be the most fiercely opposed to it? I wondered why no Western journalist had noticed this state of affairs that was staring them in the face. Today, years later, there is enough evidence to substantiate this.

Before I continue, I must make clear the distinction between Judaism as a religious identity and Zionism as a political philosophy. There are many Jews in Israel and around the world who do not identify with the hard-line policies of political Zionism.

What about the others?

I believe that at the root of this brutal state of affairs is another myth that has played a devastating role in the minds of the other Jewish citizens of Israel. It is the belief that 'this land is mine and God gave this land to me'. The hard-line Israelis *actually* believe they have God on their side. Having a debate with this kind of myth becomes extremely difficult . . . you can't argue with God.

Nevertheless, any respected historian will tell you that the state of

Israel was created through secret negotiations between the Jewish Zionists, the Americans and the British much before the end of the Second World War. In fact, after the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Zionists began negotiating with the French and British to lay down a framework for a Jewish State. These negotiations were held behind the backs of the Arabs and, most importantly, without the consent of the Palestinians, the original inhabitants of the land. Finally, the deal was ratified by the United Nations in 1948.

These historians will also tell you that Jews and Palestinians have lived in the land now called Israel since millennia. By about 400 AD, most of the Jews had left and, therefore, the vast majority of people living in this ancient land were Palestinians who were, probably, mostly Christian. With the coming of Islam, the Arabs arrived too. It was only from 1918 onwards that larger numbers of Jews began to arrive, and the great influx really started from the 1940s.

How the hell did 'god' come into the picture?

The Zionists were a pragmatic Jewish people and they foresaw a future for the Jewish community in Europe that didn't look very bright. Centuries of humiliation and massacres in Europe and Tsarist Russia had taught them a hard lesson. So, to pre-empt that future, they began secret negotiations with the imperial powers for a land of their own.

I must add that some of the land of the State of Israel was legitimately bought by early Jewish settlers from Palestinian landlords in the 1920s and 1930s. However, with the coming of the hardline Zionists from the early 1930s, the vast majority of Palestinians were driven out through wars and the terror unleashed by vicious Zionist militias like the Irgun and Stern gangs. The imperial power, Great Britain, looked the other way.

This is what created the great Palestinian diaspora.

Though most of the world has backed the Palestinian cause at the United Nations, it has not led to any change on the ground. For years, resolution after resolution has been vetoed by the US. The Palestinian people saw their leader Yasser Arafat humiliated and put under Israeli house arrest on Palestinian land. They are subjected to harsh and arrogant scrutiny at Israeli checkpoints on land that supposedly belongs to Palestinians, and they have seen every single revolt of their people, and

there have been many, crushed by the Israeli war machine. Thousands of Palestinians languish in Israeli jails; many hundreds are dead. To Palestinians, Israel is an illegal occupying power ruling with impunity. It is in these times that Hamas, a new and adversarial Palestinian political party, was born.

Eighty per cent of today's Israelis are the sons and daughters of immigrants who only came to this land after the horrors of Nazism. A sizeable percentage arrived after 1980. Deep down, all these people know that they have taken over land at the cost of the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. That is why, for most of these new settlers, the biblical myth of God's word is critical. Don't they realise it also unbelievably arrogant?

For how long will this unresolved conflict, the economic blockade of Gaza and the savage war of reprisal go on?

It is like a festering wound, the pain of which has spread far beyond the boundaries of the two states. And how has the United Nations responded? With polite outrage, as it silently watched Israel continue its rampage and slaughter. It could act with such contemptuous impunity because it had the backing of the mightiest country in the world.

Yes, Hamas is a militant organisation, and a political one. Yes, it does fire many rockets into Israel that kill or injure innocent civilians. Yes, within Israel, secretly planted bombs have left scores of people dead or injured. Yes, gruesome terrorist acts have taken the lives of Israelis abroad and, within Israel, individual acts of terror do occur with a random knife attack on Jewish citizens, or a truck that rams into a group of Israelis on the street, leaving people killed and maimed. Israel does reel in shock and sorrow as well. But Hamas too has seen its people murdered through Israeli drone strikes. And what of the atrocities committed in the creation of the state of Israel? The argument can go on and on, but in such an uneven situation, can one blame both sides equally?

If Israel acts for the security of its citizens, can you imagine what the Palestinians have to do for the dignity, welfare and security of their people?

Advice to the hard-line Zionist Israeli:

You have one very powerful country as an ally. It is your friend so long as you serve its purpose. And you have, so far. And it has served

yours. Quid pro quos, however, don't last till the end of time. Nothing does.

Meanwhile, you have built up an impressive arsenal. Whether the International Atomic Energy Agency investigates your nuclear capabilities or not, I know you have wonderful weapons that can do impressive things for your security. Your scientists at Dimona have guaranteed that. But the bottom line is that you still have to deal with the Palestinian people—people who have been in that land longer than most of your citizens.

I am aware of your traumatic history with Christendom, and I am also fully aware of the brutal persecution your people have faced right up to the rise and fall of fascism in Europe in the last century. I, therefore, understand your need for self-protection.

So, I ask you a question: when you say 'never again', what exactly do you mean? Never again for the Jewish people or 'never again' for all people? If it is the former, it has the distinct possibility of reducing itself into a terrifying self-righteousness. If it is the latter, you will reach poetry. And in poetry lies the answer to your problems. You will find the long-term solution. End of advice.

PS. The US has just thrown a spanner in the works that threatens to destroy any peace process. It has unilaterally, and against United Nations resolutions, decided to set up an embassy in Jerusalem.

SAUDI ARABIA

Holy smoke!

A writer friend of mine went to visit his son who worked for a multinational company in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The writer had been there for about three days when, early in the morning, he received a phone call from a Palestinian friend. The friend asked him to quickly drive to the downtown area of the city. He'd see something very funny, the other man assured my friend, and the drive would be well worth it.

Just as the writer was entering the downtown area, he had to stop. Blocking the road were armoured personnel carriers and army trucks. He got out of the car and walked around. What he saw was hilarious. All the roads had been cordoned off, and hundreds of troops were busy with

buckets of water, brushes and mops. And what were they doing? They were cleaning up the graffiti on the walls of the buildings. The graffiti, probably written the night before, poked fun at the Saudi royal family, calling for its overthrow, and the army was hurriedly called in to wipe out those infectious words. The blockading of the roads had led to the piling up of traffic on all sides, and people had gotten out of their cars to find out what was happening. They all got to read what was not to be read.

Now, I must admit I have never been to Saudi Arabia, and whatever I know about the kingdom has been from articles and essays, the reports of people who have visited it, and rare images that appear on television.

Putting together all I knew, the mopping-up operation seemed to me to be the essence of a kingdom that was frightened of a lot of things.

It was frightened of those words because it knew that a sizeable number of its own citizens believed in them. Given the chance, those citizens would write them too. There would be a lot of graffiti around because there was so much to write about.

There were the innumerable stories of royal brats blowing up millions upon millions of dollars in casinos, yachts, palaces and parties and whores. Then, there were stories of the billions upon billions spent on arms: arms for whom, and who was the enemy? The billions invested in government bonds in the US that the kingdom could not tell its own people about for fear of a backlash. The billions spent on maintaining a foreign army to protect the royal family because it could not trust its own soldiers or people. Added to all of this is the rumour of an unwritten pact between the US, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia of maintaining relations that safeguards all their interests.

Inside the kingdom, there were the stories of the torture and murder of hundreds of dissidents. There were the stories of misogyny. Women could be seen, yes, but strictly within the kingdom's interpretation of Islamic law. They could rarely be heard. Women were even banned from driving cars because some clerics in their wisdom decided that the erect gear shift resembled a phallus. I now hear there is some rethinking on this subject of the phallus, but imagine all these stories being recounted on the walls of so many buildings by an imaginative graffiti artist!

Yes, the royal family had a lot to be frightened about.

There was another existentialist threat too. To the Muslim world, the

royalty had to present itself as egalitarian, because the two most important shrines of Islam were under their care and protection. But could the royal family really be all that Islam demanded of it with so much cash lying around? Being of the flesh, it caved in. So, it decided to live in two worlds. It lived the strict one in Saudi Arabia, and the philandering one in the West. And it hoped the twain would never meet.

To compensate for this schizophrenia of hedonism and piety, the Saudi family were forced to back a strange strand of Islam called the Wahhabi school of thought. It was founded in the eighteenth century and the cult generated a harsh breed of clerics. They sat out in the blazing heat of the desert and sermonised to the Bedouin tribes about an Islam that would have to return to its roots. The founder even believed that the decline of the Islamic empire was because of a leadership that had deviated from the original purity of the faith. Just as many Israelis believed in God's word, so did the Wahhabi clerics who were beginning to attract large audiences. The Saudi royals, caught between a rock and a hard place as the Americans would say, began to cultivate these clerics. It funded them lavishly, and even funded this school of thought across the Islamic world.

With the arrival of the so-called War on Terror, the Wahhabi school of thought has retaliated by spawning several violent militias. Their bloody trail can be seen today in Nigeria, Somalia, Chad, Libya, Kenya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan and parts of Central Asia. The most significant offshoot is the one called ISIS.

I have a little more to add to the story of this land. Why is this kingdom called Saudi Arabia?

It is because Britain, when it was an imperial power, backed a Bedouin chief called Abdulaziz Al Saud. There were a number of reasons for this. One: the British had discovered some oil in this land. What was not known then was how much. Two: he was the leader of a powerful tribe and the British used him as a tool to oppose the Ottoman Empire that held sway over the country during the First World War. Three: they could manipulate the man because they told him that the Turks had deviated from the tenets of Islam and were, therefore, enemies of the faith. Four: the British told Al Saud that he would be allowed to become King of Arabia despite the fact that other powerful tribes had more legitimate

claims to the title. All of these reasons worked, and then the British backed Al Saud as he began to subdue the other tribes in the country. This worked too.

After the First World War, the remnants of the Ottoman Empire were divided between the French and the British. Abdulaziz Al Saud was crowned King of Arabia and hence the name: Saudi Arabia. To avoid a showdown with other contenders for the top honour, two other Bedouin chieftains of other powerful tribes in Arabia were granted kingdoms of their own: the kingdom of Jordan and the kingdom of Iraq.

Then, in the 1940s, the true extent of the vast oil reserves in Saudi Arabia were discovered, and a new power entered into the arena and a fresh deal was struck. The new power was the US, and the deal was simple: the US would guarantee the kingdom its security in return for unrestricted access to its oil.

It is a strange history if one sees what is happening in the world today.

Jordan and Saudi Arabia remain monarchies. But the king of oil-rich Iraq was overthrown by nationalist army officers in the early 1960s. The West would never forgive this act that went against their interests. Many years later, they would get their revenge.

Meanwhile, major changes are occurring in Saudi Arabia. The ruling monarch has anointed his son as heir apparent, and the young man seems to be in a hurry to present another face of his country to the world.

He is promising to introduce a 'moderate' Islam as opposed to the rigidity of the Wahhabi school of thought. The prince has also said that women will be allowed to drive cars. Which is as it should be. In another example of setting things right, after decades and decades of corruption and profligacy, dozens of high officials, including princes of the royal family, have been arrested for financial frauds. The young man also promises to diversify the country's economy and reduce its complete reliance on revenues from oil exports.

Despite all of this, why do I still smell a rat?

For one thing, the royal family remains in complete and autocratic control. Dissent still means stiff prison sentences and, very often, executions. The family retains its critical ties with the US, the Gulf kingdoms and the military dictatorship in Egypt for its survival. It has

recently signed an arms deal with the US worth a hundred billion dollars. Its secret ties with Israel remain intact, and the focus of its wrath is still Iran. A few cosmetic changes have occurred, but the status quo remains. Preserve the fiefdom at any cost.

So, what's really new?

THE SOVIET UNION

An idea whose time had come but had to go

It feels strange to be writing about a mighty state that existed for about seventy years and finally collapsed only a quarter century ago. It is still too early to process how I feel about that event.

A lot has been written about the Russian Revolution of 1918, and how, for the millions of disenfranchised people around the world, it heralded the coming of a new age, a new world. The mainstream Western media painted it as a disease that had to be eliminated. Both points of view have been endlessly examined.

But what cannot be denied is that a very large group of renowned painters, writers, poets, playwrights, thinkers, academics and performers from across the world were moved by this momentous event and its exuberant manifesto. It effected the call to arms for liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The colonised world was waking up.

I too was smitten by the ideology of the Soviet Union and, for a long time, unquestioningly supported it. When confronted with counter-arguments by well-meaning critics, including my father, I defended the revolution saying that this was just the beginning; in the overhauling of a world system, there were bound to be mistakes.

What Stalin did was wrong and brutal, of course, but didn't Khrushchev have the courage to openly reveal his grotesque excesses to the people of Russia and to the world? Did the US government ever apologise for its intervention in Korea, or the slaughter and mayhem in Vietnam? Besides, even after the departure of Stalin, the leaders in the West continued to oppose the Union, and the Western media juggernaut was painting a warped picture of what was really happening. Warts and all, I believed the revolution had its heart in the right place.

Even as I defended the Soviet Union, there were still doubts in my mind. Then, an event occurred that really set me thinking: the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan to prop up the socialist regime in the country. Though there was considerable support for the regime within the country, there was also armed resistance to it. Sure, many of the resistance groups were being nurtured by the West, but there were others that were genuinely fighting a government that they believed to be oppressive.

I have always believed, and still do, that the people of any country must decide for themselves what kind of government they want, and that any imposition from the outside will lead to disastrous consequences in the future. Though the Soviets claimed that they were invited by the regime in Afghanistan, I still questioned their presence in the country just as I questioned the nurturing of the resistance groups by the West. What is happening in Afghanistan today is a result of all these machinations.

By the early 1980s, my faith had begun to waver. I was in West Berlin for a few days and crossed the wall to East Berlin to visit the theatre where the great playwright and thinker Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist too, used to stage his plays. It was a three-hour visit, but it set me thinking. In just those three hours, I noticed the yawning differences between the two sections of the divided city. It was not the glitz and glamour in the western part that impressed me. I have always believed that most of it is a smoke-screen to cover harsher realities. What depressed me was the dourness in the eastern part, as if the life of the city had been sucked out by a vacuum cleaner.

Three years later, I made a trip to Moscow and what I saw added to my discomfort. There was a silent sullenness I discerned in people who went about their work. As the Communist Party members eulogised their system, the signs on the streets revealed other truths. I could see the craving of ordinary people for jeans, tee-shirts and Coca-Cola and touts at shady corners waiting to buy dollars for roubles far exceeding the exchange rate. In the nights, one could see prostitutes plying their trade on the streets, and so many men, old and the young, in an inebriated state walking around aimlessly. In the darkness of the night, a lot is revealed.

Was this the outcome of a revolution that had promised another kind of world?

Here was a country that guaranteed jobs for all its working-age

citizens, and believed in the equality of men and women. It looked after its elderly citizens, and guaranteed free education and healthcare for all. Its citizens did not pay more than ten per cent of their income as rent and the disparities in income between professionals and workers were minimal. Despite the picture painted by the Western media's biased coverage, these policies worked reasonably well, even if there were quite a few party members who were more equal than others.

So, what went wrong then?

How did the ludicrous craving for designer jeans and sugared water act as a spur for rebellion? What happened to the lofty dreams of a bright future, of peace and laughter that had now been reduced to numerous jokes that were making their rounds in homes across the nation?

I believe the answer to these questions lay in something that was intangible but critically important: it was in the creation of the grand, overarching idea of socialism that something very basic had been sacrificed. It had to do with the perception of exercising choice. What was missing were the continuous and participatory debates with ordinary citizens, because that was the soul of Marxism. People needed to know their opinions mattered. It didn't happen. What remained was a suffocating cloud that left very little individual breathing space.

As my father would tell me later: 'There was a lot of poetry in the idea, and then the poetry disappeared.'

AN ACT OF REDEMPTION

In January 2018, I saw a remarkable documentary on the Japanese television channel NHK. It was made by Japanese film-makers, it talked about Japanese imperial policies in the past *and* it was telecast by the premier television channel of the country.

The film examined a secretive and state-of-the-art scientific laboratory that was set up by the occupying Japanese forces in Manchuria in the late 1930s. It was here that some of the most dangerous experiments of drugs in biotechnology were being tested on live prisoners who were either Manchurian, Chinese or far-eastern Russians.

There were experiments to study the effects of frostbite on people, which required lightly clad prisoners to be put out for days in the freezing cold of Manchuria. After being tested for the effects of frostbite, they were left to die.

Far more nauseating were experiments on the effects of para-typhoid, cholera and plague bacteria. The prisoners were given infected food and then tested. It took a while before the effects of the bacteria took hold on the subjects and they died. Each death was carefully monitored. Not satisfied with the ghoulish controlled conditions of these experiments, the Japanese made biological bombs filled with bacteria that they dropped on the Chinese army, killing hundreds of soldiers. The effects of this aerial onslaught was also carefully studied.

The horrors of these experiments would never have been revealed had the Soviet army not entered the secret scientific facility at the end of the Second World War.

The Japanese in their hurried departure from this ghastly scene of crime tried their best to remove all incriminating evidence. They burnt the

laboratory down, took away many documents and evacuated their precious scientists. The plan would have worked if only they had a few more days. Unfortunately, the first Soviet tanks and troops moved in and picked up what was left behind.

It was enough.

There were documents that revealed the ghoulish nature of the atrocities committed there. More importantly, there were the junior Japanese staff members who were left behind to burn and dispose of the dead prisoners and any other incriminating evidence. They didn't have time to escape. As the Russians recorded everything these workers painstakingly revealed how the prisoners were fed infected meals, how they died and how fresh prisoners were brought in for further experiments. The Russians created a massive dossier on the secret laboratory.

The makers of the documentary, however, went much further than what was revealed in those dossiers. They visited the Japanese archives where they discovered the remainder of the critically important documents that had been spirited away. These unearthed the purpose of the laboratory, its organisational structure and how it functioned. What the film-makers also discovered was the nexus between the Japanese military, intelligence services and top-end universities. These academic institutions benefited financially by offering the services of their leading scientists for the cause of Japanese imperialism, and these academics were never put on trial. In fact, some of them went on to reach the highest positions in academia.

When the documentary ended, I was left speechless. It was telecast at a critical time.

Japan is today trying to break away from the Pacifist Constitution that was imposed upon it after the Second World War, and take on a more robust role in world affairs. The country is now the third-largest economy in the world and a technological superpower. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe aims to reflect this truth of his country in political and military terms, which, ever since the end of the Second World War, has been relegated to the role of being a bystander in world affairs.

This documentary will, hopefully, cause him to pause and think. It has one simple and powerful message for the world: when nations strive for power and glory, they do terrible things. The makers of this graphic

exposé confronted this truth and revealed it. It was an act of redemption for Japan.

Will other nations step forward too?

A FUNNY AND PAINFUL TALE

(This is a story from the *Panchatantra*. It is a simple tale of cause and effect that I believe holds good for much that is happening in our world today.)

A huge monkey, the kind that *National Geographic* defines as an alpha male, was watching some carpenters and masons going about their work. They were busy making a palace and the alpha male was curious about what they were up to. He was struck by the work of one carpenter who was cutting a huge piece of wood, trying to split it lengthwise with his axe.

The alpha male watched the carpenter carefully and soon realised that the log was opening up and the split was widening. Just then, the surveyor arrived and announced that it was time for lunch. The workers got up and left but the carpenter who was working on the log added a wedge to the spot where the split began to prevent the wood from springing back. Then, he left too.

The alpha male decided to check things out. He got up and walked, just like Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo*, carefully looking around for any signs of danger. Finally, he reached the half split log and peered at it. What was that wedge for? He was now curious. He then straddled the log on the split side and examined the wedge. What he didn't realise was that his genitals had slipped through the gap as he tried to figure out this strange contraption. He tugged at the wedge but it wouldn't budge.

Then the alpha male had an idea.

He picked up a hammer that was within his reach and began to dislodge the wedge. After a while he succeeded and the split parts slammed back together and OWWW!

The alpha monkey screamed in pain as his genitals got squashed.

A PRELUDE BEFORE A SLAUGHTER

How does one define terror? Who is a terrorist? What is the connection between the theory of cause and effect and acts of extreme violence? Does that connection justify such acts? These and other thoughts have been troubling me for some time now. But if I express them, there is a distinct possibility that I will be condemned as a sympathiser of ‘militants’ by one kind of interpretation, or as a hero by another. And therein lies the tragedy of our times.

We live in a world where words like democracy, freedom and terror have lost their meaning. The nation with the mightiest media machine, the most sophisticated means of spreading a message, and the most military and economic might lays down the interpretation which the rest of the world has to follow.

Before I get into my expanded essay there is a little story that I need to tell. It was a story that was telecast on CNN, and I’m quite sure its bosses wished it had been double-checked before it was telecast worldwide.

Luckily for me, I got to see it.

The story, telecast about six years ago, was by an ‘embedded’ American journalist who was travelling with the soldiers of a US tank crew and armoured personnel carriers as they were doing the rounds in Afghanistan on a night mission. The word ‘embedded’ is a polite way of telling the world that the story is from the point of view of whoever the journalist is embedded with. Impolitely, I would call it paid journalism (whether money is exchanged or not) because one side is given a hearing while the other side remains faceless, nameless and never given a chance to express an opinion. And all of us know that the side one gets to see and

hear is by far the more powerful.

To return to the CNN story, after a few hours of nerve-wracking tension the convoy—our diligent journalist and the good warriors searching for the bad guys—stopped for a much-needed break. The soldiers got out of their vehicles in the darkness and generally cursed the situation they found themselves in. Our journalist joked with them and there was a bit of laughter and a sense of relaxation as a few of the soldiers walked behind the vehicles to relieve themselves.

There were two or three young soldiers leaning against an armoured personnel carrier, and the journalist decided to talk to them. I do not remember the exact conversation that transpired because it was such a long time ago, but I gathered that the soldiers were frustrated because they could not tell who was an enemy and who a friend. It made every mission edgy and tense, because even a small gesture could be misunderstood and lead to terrifying consequences. They were also wondering what the hell they were doing in this desolate and unfriendly land so far from their homes. All of this was very frustrating. And then there was the final comment from a young American soldier nearest to the camera.

‘Hell, if I was one of them I’d be fighting against us too. We have invaded their country, haven’t we?’

That’s where the story ended, but that statement of the young soldier set me thinking.

Had the Western media in its numerous interventions all over the world ever considered talking to the other? Let’s take the case of Afghanistan. Who were the people opposing the occupiers? ‘They’ were mostly presented to the Western world as indoctrinated crazies, rabid fundamentalists or just plain terrorists. Perhaps some of them were. But I also believe that the vast majority of resistance fighters were not crazies because no country in the world likes to be invaded and ruled by outsiders. That is what that young American soldier was trying to say. He couldn’t tell who was the enemy and who was not . . . and that was why most Western warriors were so edgy. What was also left unsaid was that the so-called ‘bad guys’ had the support of the majority of Afghan citizens. It was therefore an unwinnable war.

'I am an Arab woman of colour and we come in all shades of anger.'

—Rafeef Ziadah,
a young Palestinian poet

FOR WHOM SHALL I MOURN?

The massacre of journalists of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and the two policemen who were present to prevent just such an attack is over. The slaughter that occurred in the supermarket is over too and the three attackers who carried out these gruesome killings are dead as well. The outpouring of grief, the mass rallies and the proclamations of freedom of speech are being heard around the world.

I shall mourn and grieve too. I shall grieve for the two policemen, who were caught in the cross-fire of ideologies that was not of their making. I shall also grieve for the unarmed policewoman who was so casually murdered as she tried to do her job directing traffic. I believe she was of African descent. I shall mourn for the hostages at the supermarket who were murdered for being Jewish. Singling out people for slaughter because of their religion was not just fascist, it revealed a warped state of mind. And, I shall mourn for the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* too. I shall grieve because they met a brutal and unnecessary end.

Today, however, my grief for them comes with a caveat.

I am sure that some of my readers would demand that grief under such circumstances should be unconditional with no 'ifs' and 'buts', yet I stand by what I have said because I believe that the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* were also, in a strange way, 'fundamentalist warriors'. They also believed they had an eternal 'Truth' on their side beyond history and circumstance. And, what was their 'Truth': that they were products of the French Revolution and heirs to 'the age of reason and enlightenment'.

So, armed with these avenging weapons of destruction, the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* firmly believed they had an unfettered license, nay a duty, to skewer anyone and everyone, especially those who

in their eyes were ‘backward’ and ‘obscurantist’.

What surprises me however is why these journalists didn’t realise that the tenets that they espoused so forcefully were very far from being true in their own backyard? Didn’t they know that though France could claim to have a great deal of Liberty, it also had a great paucity of Equality and Fraternity?

This was not something new because it was so apparent to me whenever I visited the country from the early ’80s onwards right up to the ’90s of the last century. In fact the latent and, at times, manifest racism on the streets was visible to anyone who cared to observe. The segregation of communities was starkly visible.

Didn’t the *Charlie Hebdo* team notice it too? Were they not witness to the number of race riots that kept erupting in the cities of France after the turn of the century?

I must also add that the North and West African immigrants also played a role in the segregation of communities. There was very little attempt on their side to bridge the distinct divide between the races. It almost looked as if their ghettoised existence gave them a sense of comfort and protection. In all of this there was an added distinction: the men went out of their neighbourhoods to work and therefore they could interact in some measure with the ‘other’. Their womenfolk, by and large, stayed home or in their closeted neighbourhoods. It was this distinction that would lead quite a few of them to live as they did in the lands of their ancestors rather than in the Republic of France.

Soon, however, things were going to get much worse because the times were dramatically changing both in France and around the world.

It began with the war on Terror and the invasion and overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan which was followed by the illegal invasion and overthrow of the Saddam Hussein government in Iraq, the massive upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia and then the carefully crafted plan, spearheaded by France, to overthrow the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The core of the Arab and Muslim world was being ripped open.

Didn’t the satirists at *Charlie Hebdo* notice the deep political machinations of their own Government in these events? If they didn’t, they were bad satirists. But, it wasn’t just the overthrow of governments that mattered—did they not notice the incredible human tragedy that

followed?

As the war on Terror continued its rampage across the region, hundreds of thousands of people had died. Thousands more had been injured. The bombings, targeted assassinations, drone strikes had created another crisis: the mass migration of people across borders and millions of internally displaced people. Cruise missiles, bombs and other lethal weaponry had wreaked havoc in cities and towns and villages. The Muslim world, from Pakistan to the Middle East and North Africa, reeled under the onslaught.

In the midst of their despair, the gruesome images of the humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, the images of NATO soldiers urinating on the corpses of opposition fighters in Afghanistan, the bloody images of wedding parties and civilian gatherings being obliterated by laser-guided missiles began doing the rounds across the Middle East and North Africa.

These images were swiftly forgotten in the West but were retained as memory across the Muslim world. Were these images and memories forgotten by the *Charlie Hebdo* team too?

What followed next was the blood-letting and carnage in Syria. Hundreds of thousands of people have died. Millions more have been turned into refugees. Millions of others who had lived in dignity are now reduced to scrounging for food, medicines and other basic amenities. Adding to this library of heart-wrenching disasters was the recent brutal and destructive invasion of Gaza by Israel as the West watched silently.

And then there was the final straw. To counter any resistance in the future another strategy was put in place by the West and their satraps: separate tribal loyalties were funded and encouraged in Iraq and Syria, and the differences between Sunni, Shia, Christian, Druze, Alawite, Kurd and Yazidi were actually nurtured and promoted. The net result of these divisive policies was the brutal slaughter between sectarian militias and the arrival of ISIS. A common civilisation of more than a thousand years had collapsed.

Once more I ask, didn't the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* realise what was happening? Was this how the West encouraged the 'age of reason and enlightenment'?

Who played what role in this sordid, sickening mess I will leave to

the historians, and the opening up of 'classified' files to reveal, but I do know that the US, Britain, France, Italy, and Israel were the stars of the show. The monarchs of Saudi Arabia and the other oil-rich kingdoms inordinately dependent on the might of the West to protect their wealth and fragile fiefdoms were the shining supporting cast. Turkey, a NATO member, played it both ways by running with the hare and hunting with the hound.

Other actors added to the chaos.

Bashar al-Assad of Syria could have had a dialogue with the fledgling opposition, which may or may not have been sponsored in his country, but he chose to clamp down heavily on them. Soon the opposition grew as the Turks, Saudis and the West saw an opportunity to get rid of an inconvenient leader and began to train, fund and arm the dissidents. The brutal retaliation of the Syrian regime against the differently sponsored opposition groups added fuel to the raging fire.

The role of Russia could be debated too. But, in its defence, I would like to add that it entered the arena in time to stop the legitimate government in Syria from being toppled. Besides, it was also making a point about the unilateral and often illegal interventions of the West.

There were other players too. Iran, trapped in a pincer movement across its borders, between Afghanistan and Iraq, intervened in the mayhem to protect its turf. The role of regional countries like Egypt, Bahrain and Jordan need to be mentioned also, but they were used as flunkies. I call them flunkies because they got sucked into a war that they thought they could use to their advantage, but they only ended up either using their armed forces to attack and kill their own citizens or allowing their territories to be used as training camps for mercenaries.

Did the team at *Charlie Hebdo* know about this horrible legacy? If they didn't, they were shallow cartoonists.

Which leads me to ask a question: didn't these journalists realize that the 'Truth' that they held as a flaming torch to scorch would exacerbate the existing racial and political tensions in their own country which was kept under control and manageable in the past, but in the time of the War on Terror had turned extremely volatile and incendiary? The pain, anger, humiliation and despair of the Muslim communities were not imagined. They were real. Quite a few people would be easy targets to fall into the

trap of radical Jihadists who were waiting in the wings with their dark and retributive version of Islam.

It was in these times that the savage attack on the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* took place.

Was it an act of terror? Of course it was, and there can be no excuses for it. All I am saying is that the anger and pain of a powerless and humiliated people results in asymmetrical acts of wanton revenge. To arrive at a black and white conclusion would be extremely dangerous and false.

Though I believe that the freedom of speech of the team at *Charlie Hebdo* was selective I shall mourn for them too. I don't agree with them but they had the right to express their views and they didn't have to die for it.

I know I am on thin ice here and, it is at times like these that I wish my name was Arvind Desai or Albert Pinto or Shivendra Singh or Tony Benn. But, my name is, and will be, Saeed Akhtar Mirza and there will be many who will call me a crypto-Muslim. Some might even call me a 'salafist'. All I can say to these critics is that I am a free man beyond these easy categories. What I am against is any form of imperialism.

And, I believe that the journalists at *Charlie Hebdo* saw the world from an imperial point of view, which, fundamentally, is black and white.

I shall also mourn the words of the Israeli Prime Minister who, with amazing alacrity, reached France and announced that the attacks on the journalists and at the supermarket were the handiwork of Islamic terrorism. It almost seemed like he had anticipated such an attack and was there in Paris to tell the French and the rest of the Western world: 'I told you so'.

What he was really saying was, 'Beware the Ides of Islam.'

Here was a man who didn't realise that the policies followed by his government and several others before him were, perhaps, one of the root causes that had inflamed the entire region.

He had reduced a complex argument into an absurdity.

(Excerpts from an article written for the *Outlook* magazine a few years ago¹³)

CONFRONTING ANOTHER ABSURDITY

I was invited some years ago to the Netherlands by a group of film enthusiasts and activists who wished to see *Naseem*, my film about a middle-class Muslim family set in the background of a volatile communal situation in India. The film explores the deep relationship between a grandfather and granddaughter, loosely based on my own father and my sister's daughter. It was an incredibly beautiful friendship.

The screening of the film was held in a small-town theatre about 60 kilometres from Amsterdam.

As the screening got over, the small gathering of about sixty people began to ask questions about the film and its historical context. At some point, a stocky man sitting at the back got up and interrupted the discussion. He appeared to be of South Asian descent; he had a rough beard and wore a tight-fitting coat.

'Your film is not about a Muslim family,' he said.

'What do you mean by that?' I asked, surprised.

'Muslims don't dress and behave like that.'

'Well, in my family they did. Besides, I don't believe there is a uniform way that Muslims dress.'

As a debate ensued between this man and I on what it means to be Muslim, the Dutch audience kept a diplomatic silence. Finally, I ended the debate by telling the man that there were other people in the audience who wanted to ask questions too. The man nodded.

I supposed the audience felt relieved, and after a few more questions and answers, the interaction ended. I headed to the bar in the lobby with my two hosts and ordered a beer. A few other members of the audience joined us too. I noticed that the South Asian man had joined the small

group but was standing at the edge of it.

I walked up to him and asked, 'Do you live here?'

'No, I live near Rotterdam.'

'Isn't that far from here?'

'Yes, I came by bus, and I have to leave soon because it is getting late.'

'Okay, what do you want to talk about?'

'What kind of Muslim family did you present in this film of yours?'

'It was the kind of family I was brought up in.'

'But, you are known as a leftist.'

'And so?'

'A family that produces a son like you cannot be a Muslim family.'

I wanted to punch the man, but held back. Although I was at least three inches taller than him, he was stocky, broad-shouldered and tough.

'Why did you come to see my film?'

'I wanted to see how you so-called leftists think. Do you know that the worst crime in the Quran is of people who have renounced the faith?'

'What makes you think I have renounced the faith?'

'Haven't you?'

'Have you heard of Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and al-Rhazes?'

'Who are they?'

'They were great scholars of Islam. They said the only way to understand this world is through reason. Now you go home and read about them.'

The man almost spat back at me, 'Read the thoughts of heretics? Let me tell you that one day Islam will prevail and the first persons to go to hell will be people like you.'

I smiled and shrugged. 'Can we talk about something else?'

'What do you want to talk about?'

'What work do you do here?'

'I am a machinist in a factory.'

'Were you trained here?'

'Yes. I came here when I was twenty years old.'

'How old are you now?'

'I am nearly forty-five. I am married, but I have sent my wife and my two children back to Jalalabad . . . in Afghanistan.'

‘Why?’

‘I didn’t want them to get contaminated.’

I didn’t know how to respond for a moment and then I recovered.

‘Then why don’t you go back?’

‘I have no choice. My family was very poor, so I had to earn a living. When I first arrived, I thought I could start a new life but soon I realised that this is no place to raise a family.’

‘Why?’

‘They are very cold, these people. And nowadays they look at us with a lot of suspicion. The bastards are bombing my country and they are looking at *me* with suspicion? What have we done to deserve those drone strikes and cruise missiles? What have we done? Did we attack America?’ He leaned forward and added, ‘Have you seen how their women dress? They’re like whores!’

I looked at him silently, and he stopped his tirade.

‘Don’t you have friends at your factory?’

‘I used to . . . not anymore. I do my work and mind my own business.’

‘Don’t you have any friends at all?’

‘There is a man from India. He lives close to my home. I talk to him once in a while. But let me remind you, come back to your faith. Pray and read the Quran.’

The man turned and walked away. As I watched him leave, a thought crossed my mind: ‘How could a man be so lonely, so full of anger?’

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FAREED ZAKARIA

It is the 18th of December 2016, and I have just seen and heard Fareed Zakaria's take on the turmoil and devastation in Syria on CNN. He did a great job as he showed excerpts from the speech made by the US ambassador to the United Nations, in which she posed heart-wrenching questions to the ambassadors of Russia, Syria and Iran. Along with her speech, there were also graphic images of the devastation unleashed on the city of Aleppo.

What the ambassador was basically asking these three countries was whether there was 'anything' that could move them to stop this monstrous war that had taken so many lives and destroyed so much of the country, especially in the city of Aleppo. Her emotional appeal was impressively moving. There was also another unstated message she was sending: Russia, Iran and Syria were despicably unfeeling and cold.

Fareed Zakaria agreed with her as the programme on CNN concluded.

Let me begin by saying that the carnage in Syria is absolutely terrible and the human cost horrific.

BUT.

Why is there always a 'but' in my discourse? Perhaps it is because both Ambassador Samantha Power and Zakaria believe they have the right to be outraged and lay the blame at the doorstep of those they feel are guilty. Which of course they do, but then I also have the right to question their beliefs.

Samantha is a career diplomat who appears to actually believe in the naïve notion that the US should propagate and promote its 'values' around

the world because they are unquestionably benevolent. Secondly, she has been brought up to believe that those opposed to the values of the US are the bad guys. That is why she singled out Russia, Iran and Syria—they stood on the opposite side of her fence.

Does Fareed think the same way too?

Samantha was raised on these fundamentals and she has probably never bothered to question them. If only she had. In fact I shall suggest a book that she ought to read which was written some decades ago by a very senior American diplomat named William Blum. He resigned from the State Department in disgust when he found out about all the covert activities that the CIA was up to around the world. Then he wrote this book called *Killing Hope*, in which he documented all the assassinations, attempted assassinations, military interventions and regime changes that the CIA had engineered since the Second World War.

I would also like to know if Fareed has read the book.

Coming back to Samantha, did she not know about the plans to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad? As a senior diplomat, she would have known about the secret preparations, but she chose to look the other way because Assad was the bad guy who posed a potential threat to her country's allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. She would also have known about how the resistance groups were trained and armed in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and, perhaps, Jordan. There were also whispers of training camps in Israel.

Can you imagine stranger bedfellows?

Didn't Samantha realise that, with this kind of intervention, there would be a corresponding reaction? What about Fareed? Did he know about these secret preparations?

Bashar al-Assad had a fight on his hands. And fight he did. He had learnt a bitter lesson from the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Gaddafi had tried to use minimum force against his own people. It was not enough; he was overthrown and brutally murdered.

Bashar was not going to let that happen in his country.

He launched a major offensive against the insurgent forces. For about three-and-a-half years, the battle raged and more and more insurgent groups, sponsored by outside countries, joined the fray, and thousands upon thousands of people died on both sides of the divide. Towns and

cities were destroyed. The Western press called Bashar a murderer and their political leaders said that if a solution to this conflict had to be found, it would have to be done without him. Bashar al-Assad had to go. It was a strange demand. Bashar al-Assad was the legitimate leader of a country and the Western, Saudi, Israeli and Turkish political establishments wanted him out to arrive at a political solution.

After three-and-a-half years of slaughter and mayhem, a new and terrifying insurgent Sunni force suddenly emerged: it was called ISIS or Daesh.

There is a great mystery about its origins, and the rumour mills are having a field day trying to figure out its sponsors. Some suggest it is a Saudi, Turkey and, surprisingly, Israeli enterprise. Others see the hand of Western powers too as promoters.

Did Samantha know about these rumours? Were they just rumours? What did Fareed think about these rumours?

Getting back to the war, it was now that the Russians stepped in. Today, after massive Russian air and missile attacks, the government forces have launched fresh offensives and seem to be gaining the upper hand. In all of this, a country has been brought down to its knees.

Thousands upon thousands of innocent civilians, Syrian troops and insurgent fighters have died. Some estimates put the death toll to about 3,00,000. Millions of refugees have fled their homes to find safer spaces. So much of the country, including its irreplaceable antiquities, has been destroyed.

All of this because of a secret plan by a bunch of outsiders to overthrow a bad guy.

I am outraged too.

I am not a supporter of Bashar al-Assad because I firmly stand by the idea of freedom of speech and the right to dissent. I also oppose any kind of dynastic ambitions. But these are my views, and who the hell am I to sit on judgement? It is for the citizens of that country to decide, revolt or make peace.

On my two visits to Syria, I was amazed by the amount of tolerance that existed between Sunnis, Shia, Alawites, Christians, Druze and Kurds. Perhaps there were underlying tensions—there must have been—but there was much, much more of a common, evolved civilisation visible than

religious or ethnic differences. This had been built up over the centuries and it stared you in the face. I am outraged that this inclusive civilisation has been destroyed by the machinations of outsiders.

As I traversed this beautiful country by road, I did not once meet a beggar or anyone asking for alms. Syria is by no stretch of imagination a rich country, but it did guarantee most of its citizens a great deal of dignity. I have seen much more poverty and despair on the streets of New York and Chicago.

All of this leads me to ask a question to Samantha Power: couldn't we have left the Syrian people to decide things by themselves? Haven't we learnt anything from the tragic lessons from across Asia, Africa and Latin America?

This brings me to Fareed Zakaria.

In the past I have often found his programmes balanced and well-reasoned, specifically on domestic issues in the US. It is when he ventures into American foreign policy that I have a few questions to ask of him.

Has Fareed really questioned what his nation means by 'interests' and 'values'. Whose 'interests' are they? Are they also the interests of the American people? Is the US a genuine democracy? Or do special-interest groups run it? Why does the country always need to prop up an enemy of some kind? Why is it always at war defending freedom . . . and, more importantly, whose freedom? Can the arming and training of insurgent outfits be justified to overthrow a government? If yes, who decides which government stays and which goes? Why has he never really questioned the actions and policies of Israel in the occupied territories, which by any standards of international law are completely illegal? What is his view on cause and effect? Why is the cause never questioned while the effect almost always is? I believe it is the job of any serious journalist to ask these questions.

I also firmly believe that if Fareed asks these questions, he will not be accepted as the amiable and amicable journalist that he is today in the US. This also holds good for all those writers and journalists from India whose views are regularly published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The New Yorker*. They proudly display their international credentials, not realising that in today's world, those very credentials are suspect. They too have been accepted for the same reasons that Fareed

Zakaria has been accepted: they have not asked the unscripted questions.

THE LONELINESS OF BEING ARUNDHATI ROY ...

The power elite of the world dismiss this frail-looking woman as a radical anarchist or grudgingly respect her, thanks to the sheer force of her arguments. To many, she is even a feared voice that can surgically destroy simplistic platitudes that political leaders dish out regularly to explain complex issues, and the excuses that nations manufacture to either go to war or quell democratic and legitimate opposition and the grievances of common citizens.

Her name is Arundhati Roy and her battles range from fighting for the democratic rights of the Kashmiri people to that of the tribals in India. She speaks of the perils of climate change, and of curbing the power of the oil and arms lobbies. She raises her voice against imperialist wars of aggression. Her battles continue for Palestinian rights, against gender discrimination, press and information freedom and support for gay rights movements around the world. If the cause is for justice, she will support it.

So why then ‘The loneliness of being Arundhati Roy’?

While people and movements around the world have embraced and welcomed her and accept hers as a powerful voice for the dispossessed, strangely, that welcome eludes her in India.

Even among the liberals, left-wingers and the socially conscious intelligentsia of the country, there are those who don’t support her. This could be put down to differences of opinion, perhaps even of political strategy or even the targets Arundhati chooses to put on her firing line: she spares no one.

It could also be because she is completely unorthodox: she is a writer and thinker beyond borders, unconstrained by any ideology that draws

invisible lines that cannot be crossed. She is a free-spirited mind, which demands a world that is less iniquitous and more just. I believe it is this fierceness of unrestricted purpose that makes quite a few of the intelligentsia in India uncomfortable.

She is the continuous rebel and that takes courage. Besides, she also asks the unscripted questions . . . which also leads to a certain kind of loneliness.

... AND THE LONELINESS OF RANA AYYUB

Her writing doesn't have flair or élan, and she still has to develop the skills for deep political and historical analysis. But what Rana Ayyub has going for her is incredible courage and the dogged determination of an investigative journalist who refuses to let a story die. Simple as that sounds, very few journalists have this quality.

Rana Ayyub refuses to allow our collective memories to fade.

I first read her articles/exposés about twelve years ago when she along with a few other colleagues wrote for a magazine that specialised in investigative journalism. Thanks to the work of these incredibly talented youngsters and the brilliance of its working editor, the magazine shot into prominence and became a force to be reckoned with in the Indian and international political scene within a few years.

Unfortunately, thanks to the shenanigans and opportunism of its founding editor, the magazine suddenly collapsed. Thousands upon thousands of loyal readers who had backed this path-breaking enterprise felt cheated and the talented bunch of journalists who had made the magazine what it was had no choice but to head off to new pastures.

I often wondered about Rana. Where was she? Was she still writing, and if she was, where was her stuff being published? Some friends told me that they had seen her on television programmes that had too many panellists for any serious debate. Then even these sightings ended.

Why the hell was I concerned?

I guess it was because of the stuff she had been writing about: it had deep political ramifications and the people in her firing range were incredibly powerful politicians and a very secretive fascist organisation. Besides, even the police force and the administration of the state she had

targeted had been compromised and brought to heel.

Am I being too dramatic?

I don't think so. Three left-wing rationalists have been murdered for their views. Journalists with liberal views have been eliminated. People branded as hoodlums have been killed in 'encounters'; others branded as terrorists have been arrested and incarcerated and tortured for years before being released for lack of evidence. Even members within the fascist fraternity who had differing opinions have been found murdered. Students protesting against ideological incursions and growing intolerance were slapped with sedition charges. Scholars, writers and film-makers have been viciously attacked too.

Yes, Rana Ayyub had a battle on her hands. And I was worried for her.

Then she suddenly re-emerged, all guns blazing. She came out with a book that she self-published. It became an instant bestseller. Titled *Gujarat Files*, the book had Rana playing a stellar role as a performer. She knew she was on the watch-list because of her earlier articles, so now she passed herself off as an Indian American who just loved these fascists and wanted to know the details of how they carried out the carnage in their state.

She picked up an accent, dressed the way she thought an Indian American would, and entered the den of wolves. What she discovered was explosive.

The perpetrators of the carnage thought they had an American 'believer' in their midst, and they opened up and proudly revealed their gruesome secrets. Rana took it all in and then wrote her book. Then she did something incredibly wise: knowing that her readers might doubt her revelations, she had one of the most eminent and upright judges in the country to write the foreword of her book. The judge too was an admirer of her previous work. In the foreword, he clearly stated that he could not guarantee the veracity of what the book contained, but if it were true, it was very, very disturbing.

Well done, Rana, but I still worry for you.

HOPE

Here now is a short note about two very special young men.

The first is a student who has courageously entered the overcrowded and largely corrupt political arena in India.

He was born and studied in a small village in Bihar, continued his educational journey and finally ended up in Delhi to do his PhD. His name is Kanhaiya, and I have just finished reading his book *From Bihar to Tihar*, which simply and eloquently documents his growing political and social awareness. For those readers who are unaware of certain ironies in the title of his book, Bihar is considered a backward state in India, and Tihar is the country's most famous prison.

Kanhaiya belonged to a very poor family, but what he inherited was an intuitive and analytical mind and innate curiosity, which helped him evolve into a mass leader. This is manifested clearly in the vast crowds of students, the disenfranchised and the marginalised and just ordinary citizens who flock to his rallies as he talks about freedom: from hunger, from hate, from joblessness, from caste and communal violence, from gender inequality, from disease, from homelessness, from illiteracy, from corruption, from malnutrition, from sectarianism and from hopelessness.

It is a kind of freedom that Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Fidel Castro, Jeremy Corbyn, Pope Francis, Nelson Mandela, even Bernie Sanders have all espoused. Yet Kanhaiya has chiselled his message not only from the textbooks he has read, but also from his own experiences and the people he met as he journeyed from his village to the capital of India. It is a journey so tangible and evocative that it strikes a chord in the hearts of millions of young people as they try to negotiate their desperate lives in an emerging and uncaring new world.

His message of freedom was considered so dangerous that the regime in power had him arrested on charges of sedition and treason, but the courts overruled the preposterous charges. I am glad that the freedoms Kanhaiya talks about still resonate across my land.

The second young man came as a surprise to me. His name is Jignesh Mevani. He isn't a student but a young man who has picked up his political and social acumen from belonging to one of the most oppressed communities India has to offer. He belongs to the scheduled castes, the 'untouchables' that the brahminical code has imposed on the rest of humanity.

The tragedy is that I had never heard of Jignesh till about a few months ago when a senior television journalist, an upper-caste of course, interviewed him in relation to the coming elections in the state of Gujarat. Jignesh was part of a major revolt that the state was experiencing. Large sections of disenfranchised citizens were questioning the empty slogans of the same right-wing party that had promised them a paradise.

As a young man, Jignesh had been taken in by these slogans. Then, he began to question them. With a little bit of common sense and a larger dose of political understanding, he realised how hollow they were.

The next thing he knew he was standing for elections . . . and against the mightiest political machine the country had seen.

Jignesh won.

So when the journalist began to ask questions, he quickly realised that he couldn't deal with Jignesh's anger, wit and carefully calibrated political acumen. Jignesh had smashed through the barriers of being just an oppressed scheduled caste citizen to being a voice for all the oppressed people in the country.

SOLILOQUY: A WORLD INHERITED

I am almost at the end of this book of essays, tales, conversations and soliloquies, and I still feel a bit dissatisfied. My journey to understand the world that I had inherited has been tumultuous. At the beginning of my yatra of discovery was Vietnam. Through it I could understand the changes taking place in my own country and those that were occurring around the world. Everything seemed to fall into place.

Today, I am not so sure.

The disconcerting unilateral acts of war and the retributive terror that follows, the extrajudicial drone strikes to eliminate terror suspects that, quite often, obliterate innocents too, the frenzied security concerns, the intelligence over-reach and the surveillance of ordinary civilians, the indiscriminate bombings, the millions of desperate refugees and the homeless, the violence unleashed by sectarianism and racism, the arming of militias and mercenaries, the deliberate and planned instability of nations and the rise of ultra-nationalism . . . all of these have left me numb. Within countries there is growing unemployment and anger as the costs for food, housing, education and healthcare rise steadily.

Who or what is behind this state of affairs?

I have concluded that it does not matter which political leader assumes power where. There is something else that is driving our world, something that cannot really be seen or heard. It is a kind of ghost, an apparition in the shadows that has quietly replaced faces and people. Before I elaborate on what causes me a certain kind of anxiety I must bring in two people, both close friends of mine, who have taken two separate paths to dealing with the future.

The first is Rajan Prasad, a card-carrying member of the Communist

Party of India (Marxist). We have been close friends for about thirty-five years. Rajan, as a student, was an early convert to the Marxist cause. Though I do have deep differences with some of his party's political stances, I admire him.

Rajan was in charge of the cultural front in Delhi, which was set up after the young and dynamic political activist, writer and actor Safdar Hashmi was murdered by political goons. He happened to belong to the same party as Rajan, and the murder caused outrage among ordinary citizens all over the country.

So, Rajan along with Safdar's sister Shabnam founded SAHMAT.

It was like a magnet for liberals, leftists of all hues, and for painters, writers, artistes, theatre people, film-makers and academics. Besides the artistes and intellectuals, a large number of decent and ordinary citizens came to participate and volunteered to be of any kind of help. The cultural front fought for causes they believed in: gender equality, free speech and thought, against communalism and sectarian forces, against parochialism, and also for the rights of tribals and scheduled castes. Besides, Rajan's and Shabnam's tiny office and its environs was also a space for debates and exchange of ideas, and endless rounds of tea. That was another reason for the regular congregations.

Rajan often had a rough time when this disparate and opinionated group tore into some of the things his comrades in power did in states like West Bengal and Kerala.

In both these states, his party was a political force to be reckoned with. Rajan took our criticism in his stride. But then our criticism expanded to include the policies of the Soviet Union or China, or the brutality of leaders like Stalin or the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Afghanistan. At one level, Rajan had to defend the party line, and at another, he had to deal with people like us. And there were a lot of people like us.

'I have to accept it,' he once told me. 'That's what democracy is all about.'

I also believe he secretly agreed with quite a few of our views. But people like us, who air their views freely but refuse to join a political movement for change, have a much easier time. As for Rajan, warts and all, his faith has never wavered. He still firmly believes that the future for

a just and more equal world lies in democratic socialism.

‘There is no other choice. I know my party has made many mistakes, blunders even, but don’t tell me capitalism is the answer. As a philosophy, it is bankrupt,’ Rajan says and smiles. I smile too.

Unfortunately, SAHMAT has fractured considerably, and many of the people who used to gather there for an afternoon or evening of debate have left too. Rajan and his small band of remaining colleagues carry on their lonely battle.

I now arrive at my expansive and always generous friend Romi Khosla.

He is a kind of left-leaning, technology-driven and simultaneously Buddhist-leaning architect and town planner. He is a great cook and raconteur of tales. And, most importantly, he is also a futurist thinker. The amount of time Romi spends thinking about the course the world is taking today and will take in the future is startling.

Can anybody be all of this? If you meet Romi, you will believe it.

Over the last decade, we have had numerous debates, sometimes ending in a stalemate, at other times to understanding and agreement. The debates that have led to a stalemate are fundamentally centred on the role that capitalism as an economic system plays in the upheavals around the world. Our convergence of views stems with agreeing that the poor are increasing around the world and that the concentration of wealth is now in the hands of fewer people.

‘And these fewer people are the ones who run the world,’ says Romi.

Romi then lists out a detailed account of the machinations in the last century beginning with a small group of bankers who laid down the framework for running the world and moulding it to suit their needs. It started out in Western Europe but the group got bigger and is now concentrated in the US, with affiliate think tanks in Europe. He even lists out a Council of Foreign Relations, a Trilateral Commission and a Chatham House that has members from around the world who dictate policy that can, and often does, influence the course of world events.

‘It is world governance that has defined goals and its purpose is to impose order in chaos,’ Romi asserts.

I smile at the arrogance of the thought. ‘Did anybody ask them to organise the world in their image?’

Romi smiles too. 'Look,' he says, 'by the late eighteenth century it had become apparent to Europe that they were on the rise. The slave trade and the gold and silver bullion looted from the Americas had given them a tremendous advantage. By the late nineteenth century, they were the masters of the world . . . the Ottoman, Mughal and Chinese empires that could offer some resistance had collapsed like a house of cards.'

'And so?'

'Being imperialists, they naturally believed they were a superior people. But it was the bankers and financiers who really gained the most power. Everybody else needed funds for wars, for trade, for deals to be struck.'

'So, the bankers decided to impose their kind of order without asking anyone.'

'They did.'

'They could create wars, impose order and also create chaos to suit their needs, right?'

Romi laughed. 'You're right on all counts. To these people, it doesn't matter if a nation is democratic or not. What matters to this cartel is control over resources and the retention of power through either stability or controlled chaos.'

I have read and understood enough about the world to realise that, at one level, what Romi is stating is the obvious: the world is ruled by the powerful. The difference is that he is talking about a particular organisation, a kind of medieval guild of bankers and financiers that is secretive in its deliberations, is not elected by any democratic process and has the power to manipulate events around the world with impunity. It can also intervene in critical decision-making processes of individual nations, manipulating events to suit their needs, manufacturing wars and even, surprisingly, organising peace. It has been doing this for more than a hundred years. Romi also provides you with detailed facts, figures and names of the leaders of the cartel that began from a certain time in history right up till today to underline his argument.

The thought is disturbing.

'What about including big corporations . . . the arms, oil, pharmaceuticals, food and chemicals, the money launderers, wheeler-dealers, in fact the whole range of the capitalist system in your theory?' I

ask.

‘They play a role too, but the big boys are the bankers.’

‘If what you say is true and not a conspiracy theory, what should one do?’

Romi smiles and shrugs and says, ‘You either live with it or find ways and means to mobilise people to politically renegotiate with their governments and regain their natural and legal rights.’

I smile. How do you renegotiate with a government that has little control over its own future without the approval of the cartel? Will it be allowed to negotiate with its citizens?

In a strange way, I believe that both my friends have a valid argument. It is now clear that capitalism has reached a point of no return, and it cannot any longer sustain, by its obsolete thesis of the trickle-down effect, a growing population of the disenfranchised. The rich will get richer and the poor, poorer.

As Rajan said, capitalism is a bankrupt idea that works . . . for the few.

There is, however, something else that really disturbs me. How did the words ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ get linked to capitalism? It seems such an incredible contradiction. The communists tried to hijack these words too, but at least they were trying to achieve some sort of equality.

Today, with capitalism holding centre stage, we have the very rigorous documentation of Thomas Piketty which reveals that the number of poor is increasing and that real power lies in fewer hands. That doesn’t sound democratic at all and, if the poor and the middle class, who happen to be the vast majority, have lost control over their lives and destiny, it doesn’t sound like freedom either. Both these words were used by George Bush, the outgoing president of the US, as he addressed the Iraqi and world media in Baghdad. What he got in return were a pair of shoes hurled at him in anger.

I now come to the position of Romi Khosla.

Whether it is a single, secretive organisation of incredibly powerful bankers and financiers or a much larger group of industrialists and multinational entities that include oil, arms and pharmaceutical corporations, financial wheeler dealers or manipulators of commodity prices, there is one grand and imperious idea that unites them all: they

want control and power over the world and its resources. They will go to any lengths to achieve that, whether it is through wars, undemocratically enforced stability or controlled and sponsored chaos. Nations and people do not matter. And the final arbiter to make this 'world governance' work is the armed might of the most powerful country in the world.

It seems we have come round a full circle.

So many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have sacrificed a tremendous amount to rid themselves of their colonial history and gain political independence only to find themselves back on their knees today seeking 'financial aid and investments' from the world's imperial bankers.

There is another disturbing thought too.

It also seems that a new cutting edge of technology is being put into place that does not require the presence of people: driverless cars, pilotless aircraft, sophisticated robotics and artificial intelligence. The unpredictability of the human being and the questioning process that necessarily follows is rapidly being eliminated. People will have to find other things to do. And nobody is telling them what that will be. This is the world we will soon be living in.

Can ordinary citizens be brought back to centre stage, where we belong? I hope so.

A TALE

Mulla Nasruddin, riding on his donkey, arrived at the gates of the capital of an egoistic and self-promoting Sultan. On seeing him the guards at the gate told him, 'You have to sing praises of the Sultan before we allow you to enter.'

'Why?'

'That's the law. All outsiders have to sing praises of the Sultan, otherwise they will not be allowed to enter.'

Mulla was surprised

'But how can I sing praises when I don't know a thing about him?'

'That is not our concern.'

Mulla was bemused

'For how long do I have to sing?'

'Till we tell you to stop.'

Mulla thought this over for a while and then he loudly began to sing praises.

'I enter the kingdom of the most powerful emperor in the world. He is known for his bravery, compassion and intelligence. Is there any king who dares to look him in the eye? No one! Even the sun and the moon bow to him and the most beautiful princesses are yearning to be his bride. All the people in his vast empire love him and he loves them. In fact, he has just announced that he will reduce the taxes on the farmers by more than half, and he will build homes for the needy and . . . '

Mulla was suddenly interrupted by a guard who said:

'That is enough, you can enter.'

Mulla smiled. As he passed through the gates, his donkey farted.

Time to pay one's salaams.

AN APOLOGY TO FRIENDS UNKNOWN

I know I have done a great deal of West-bashing in this journey of mine and I believe it is time to apologise to some friends who I don't really know, and all of them are products of Western society.

Theirs were the voices raised, questioning the policies of imperialism and the havoc it has caused in the lives of peoples and countries. Their contribution to a more compassionate, just and inclusive world cannot be stressed enough. I can hardly name all of them because it would run into the thousands and so here's a restricted list to help my readers understand what I'm talking about.

I start with Karl Marx who in 1848 set the cat among the pigeons with his book *Das Kapital*.

He was the man who introduced me to the emerging impact of a new world order, and his analysis of where it would lead me. I was introduced to words like feudalism, capitalism, the bourgeoisie, the working class, the petite bourgeoisie and people described as lumpen. These were not just words but categories that would, according to Marx, define future social and economic relations between people as the world surged forward from the feudal to the industrial mode of production.

There was a precision in the definition of these categories and the analytical process Marx used to arrive at what was called dialectical materialism. Through this process, Marx arrived at his trenchant critique of the contradictions of capitalism. It was this analytical process that gave future philosophers and thinkers the intellectual ammunition to add to or even question his thesis.

This, dear reader, is not dry theory, for it directly or indirectly affected the worldview of people in the West, among them Charles

Chaplin, Pablo Picasso, Arthur Miller, Woody Guthrie, Bernard Shaw, Tom Stoppard, Marlon Brando, Bertrand Russell, John Lennon, John Berger, Salvador Dali, Bertolt Brecht, Malcolm X and hundreds of other painters, writers, journalists and film-makers during the early years of the last century. A new sense of freedom and experimentation evolved that could be seen in the emergence of modern art, in music, in experimental theatre and in the art of cinema that was liberated from the stranglehold of literature.

Marxism unleashed other ideas too that would have very far-reaching consequences around the world: for instance, the idea of equality—of gender, and between races and ethnicities. The famous quote attributed to Mao Zedong sums it all up: ‘Women hold up half the sky.’ This search for a more just and equitable world was revolutionary, and one can trace the long journey of the struggles and battles that women, workers, the disenfranchised and the marginalised waged from those times onwards.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, communists, socialists, anarchists, luddites, free-thinkers and a host of other radical movements were taking shape and form in Western Europe and the US. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the workers’ Solidarity Movement on both sides of the Atlantic got a tremendous boost.

After the Second World War, Marxism also influenced the political views of a host of revolutionaries and thinkers in other parts of the world like Che Guevara, Patrice Lumumba, Hugo Chavez, Fidel Castro, Juan Perón, Gabriel García Márquez, Gamal Nasser, Sukarno, Muammar Gaddafi, Ho Chi Minh and Nelson Mandela. In India, I could also name, among others, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, Jai Prakash Narayan, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Aruna Asaf Ali, Nayantara Sehgal, Narayan Surve, Periyar, Bhagat Singh, Ismat Chughtai, Premchand, Ram Manohar Lohia, Medha Patkar, Baba Amte, Balraj Sahni, and even the new and dynamic young student leaders in India, Kanhaiya Kumar, Jignesh Mevani, Shehla Rashid and Umar Khalid. The list is almost endless.

As Marxism brought the deep fault-lines in the world and in society into sharper focus, there was a backlash against it too.

It led to the rise of Adolph Hitler and Mussolini in Europe. In India, there were the indirect spin-offs, like the birth of the RSS and, later,

outfits like the Shiv Sena. In the Middle East, the Wahhabi school of Islam was used to counter the influence of nationalist and socialist ideas, and the recent emergence of ISIS seems to be influenced by the same school of thought.

In other words, Karl Marx, because of his critique of capitalism, was really and, at times inadvertently, responsible for quite a few things. And today we are still witness to some of the thousands of voices in the West that have been raised against an iniquitous economic and political system. My choice is unfortunately extremely selective and it does not give a fair representation to the hundreds of poets, painters and film-makers from the non-English speaking world.

So let me begin.

My salaams go to the songs and actions of John Lennon who went beyond being a mere singer to being a socially responsible activist. His famous quote at a concert reflected his world-view: 'Those at the back clap your hands; those in front rattle your jewellery!' How can I ever forget the angst and anger in the music of Jimi Hendrix as he played his rendition of 'The Star Spangled Banner', devastatingly mauling the national anthem? And then there were the songs and lyrics of Bob Marley who brought into sharp focus the existential tragedy of the slave trade.

I congratulate Sean Penn and John Cusack for the anti-imperialist stand that they have taken, and their use of powerful platforms to speak about it. The films and documentaries by Michael Moore and Oliver Stone have also played a vital role in mobilising public opinion. Stone's relentless critique of the hypocrisy and contradiction in the West's usage of words like 'democracy' and 'freedom' is exemplary. Michael Moore's critique on the cost of healthcare for the average American citizen and his backing of the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter movements have garnered tremendous support within his own country. There are so many other film-makers and artistes and even athletes who have also come out into the open, put their careers at stake and added their voices to the growing demand for a more equitable and just economic system.

But there is one leader in the US who took me completely by surprise.

I take pride in keeping abreast of world affairs, and yet the name of a politician called Bernie Sanders did not exist for me until he tossed his hat

into the ring for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party. What surprised me about him was that he was a self-confessed socialist who was drawing massive crowds at his speeches on the campaign trail. I had always believed that ‘socialism’ along with ‘communism’ were the two most despised words in the US . . . so what the hell was happening?

The huge crowds listening to him cut across all social backgrounds: there were the young, the old, the white the black, the college-going student and the blue-collar worker, and all of them were drawn to his clear and simple message: American democracy had been hijacked by the very few and at the cost of the vast majority of its citizens.

I must now pay my respects to the patriarch of modern dissent: Noam Chomsky. He is the person who kindled the questioning process in the minds of thousands of people both in the US and around the world. I must also include the names of Edward Said, a prominent voice of dissent and the most respected spokesperson for the Palestinian cause. Then there are books of Naomi Klein, who started her career as a peddler of goods in the world of consumerism and then moved away from it to become its greatest critic. I also salute the courage and revelations of whistle-blowers like Julian Assange, John Snowden and Chelsea Manning, who brought to the world’s notice the dark and incredibly grisly secrets of the imperialist mindset.

The last name that I will take is that of an academic I met briefly in New York and who broke my heart—so clearly was pain and anguish etched on his face. His name is Norman Finkelstein and he has paid a terrifying academic and social price for his critique of ‘the business of the holocaust’, and for speaking out against Israeli policies in Gaza and the occupied West Bank. Norman is the son of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, and he still finds the courage to see things from a wider perspective. It seems he now teaches at a university in Turkey and occasionally gets the odd teaching assignment in the US. When I asked him why he couldn’t find a regular job teaching back home, he smiled ironically and said, ‘If you think the way I do, it’s tough.’

There are unwritten laws about the lines you can cross.

A SALUTE TO SOME FRIENDS I KNOW

As I near the end of my book of essays and tales, I would like to say thank you to some friends who were around when we really needed them.

My brother Aziz, Kundan Shah and I had just produced a television serial called *Police Station*. Kundan had directed the series, and Aziz and he were also deeply involved with the scriptwriters in evolving the seven stories. We had sent in the proposal for this series to Doordarshan, the state-owned television channel, and the people in charge of reviewing such proposals talked to us in detail about our approach. Finally, we were given an okay in principle.

I repeat: we had discussed our approach in detail and were given a verbal assurance that we could ‘go ahead’.

It took Kundan and Aziz months to research the project. They visited several police stations and lock-ups, and talked to some undertrials; they spoke to officers and policemen, crime reporters, police informers, and then finally settled down with the writers to work out the scripts. Careful attention was given to prevent the scripts from being too graphic or ‘biased’ against the police. It took some more months to get them right.

Finally, the shooting began and what emerged was an incredible, often frightening, at times heart-wrenching, piece of work. The stories, the camera-work, the performances of the actors and the details of the milieu worked together in complete harmony. All of us were so proud of it: seven case studies that resulted in seven episodes.

Kundan and I headed to Delhi to present these case studies to the bureaucrats at the channel. They asked us to leave the cassettes behind for them to review, after which they would call us in for a discussion.

We got a call three days later.

When we visited the bureaucrats, we were met with a strange silence. Finally, one of them said that they would not be able to telecast the serial because it was too hard-hitting. We were stunned. He also went on to tell us that they had managed to get the top officer of the Mumbai Police, who was visiting the city, to view the episodes and that his response had been explosive. He threatened that, if this serial was telecast, he would organise the entire police force of the country to raise funds and produce a serial that would expose the machinations and corruption of the bureaucracy.

That was fine with us we thought, but what about our serial? We also said that we had created this series so that there could be a national debate on police reforms. In fact, that was the original purpose of this exercise.

Kundan and I added that what we had revealed was just a small part of what really went on in a police station. The reality was far worse and, besides, we had tried to balance the picture by introducing an upright police officer who was shunted from one posting to another because he refused to be a part of the club. In Mumbai Police parlance, such people are called ‘mastiwale’.

Despite this, we were firmly yet politely told that the permission would have to come from ‘higher-ups’. Kundan and I walked out of the office building and decided we would not give up without a fight. We would try to meet with those higher-ups.

We spent about twenty-odd days in the city, and accomplished nothing. We did manage to show parts to some politicians, but no one was willing to take a chance. The serial was too much of a hot potato.

But I want to tell the tale of those twenty days, and of the friends who rallied around us. More than the money that we had invested in the project, we were concerned about the effort and struggle that Kundan and Aziz had endured to create a work of such integrity. Besides, we had firmly believed it could lead to a national debate that our country desperately needed.

I remember the nights we spent talking with Romi and Kalpana and the rounds of whisky drunk to, so to speak, soften the pain. The two of them have a great knack for lightening a tense situation. I recall the afternoon chats with Rajan and Madhu as they tried to call up friends who knew friends who knew politicians who could be of help. The phone calls didn’t help much, but their efforts did much for our morale.

The evenings spent with Nina and Ashok and their two incredible young daughters Noni and Neerja, then aged eight and six, come to mind. These two young girls intuitively felt our anguish and told us not to worry . . . everything would turn out fine. It was incredible—two little children comforting two grown men. Today Noni is a tough, no-nonsense lawyer, and Neerja, a professional working in television production.

How can I forget the evenings that we spent at the home of Indu and Chandru, where heated discussions would take place on whether the political climate in the country was conducive to telecasting the serial that we had created. None of the group had actually seen our work; for them, our word was good enough. The quiet and dignified support we got from our friends Sunila and Mickey Patel and their children Rishad and Ria still shores me up. Mickey would often mutter under his breath, ‘I wish I could be of help.’

And, finally, my younger friends Savita and Jawed Naqvi. Savita kept reassuring us that even if things did not materialise, we should not despair. ‘Treat this like a minor setback. Start something else!’

Jawed on the other hand attempted to deflect our dark thoughts with hilarious stories about his student days at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, and his escapades as a political activist. Between bouts of poetry, he would regale us with tales about his family and the regal traditions of Lucknow and, in the process, also take jibes at the feudal system that underpinned those traditions. All of this went on day after day, and finally when we were leaving the city and heading home, Jawed turned to us and said, ‘You guys made a great series. It doesn’t matter if it was shown or not. Look at it this way: perhaps our country doesn’t deserve it.’

I looked at Jawed and he shrugged. Kundan laughed at this laconic comment. Suddenly a weight seemed to lift off my mind. I smiled and said to him, ‘Thanks a lot.’

‘Don’t mention it. The next time you have a problem, I can give you another quotable quote.’

To all these friends I say, thank you for giving us your time.

NOTES

1. This article from 2012, well before the general elections of 2014, is a revealing portrait of Prime Minister Narendra Modi: <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>.
2. A Human Rights Watch report on the 2002 pogrom: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/02/24/india-decade-gujarat-justice-incomplete>.
3. The most expensive elections ever: <https://qz.com/327771/it-cost-narendra-modi-100-million-to-win-the-indian-election-heres-how-he-spent-it/>; <https://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2014/05/campaign-finance-india>, and other sources.
4. Read M.J. Akbar's *Riot After Riot* (Penguin India, 1991), a scathing indictment of the political and administrative establishment.
5. A report by senior journalist Hartosh Singh Bal on the matter: <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/1984-massacre-how-senior-leaders-congress-sanctioned-organised-violence-indira-gandhi-death>.
6. See, for instance: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jan/17/yemen.islam>.
7. A comment on how the Iraq War was about the oil: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/earth-insight/2014/mar/20/iraq-war-oil-resources-energy-peak-scarcity-economy>.
8. This investigation, in collaboration with *The New Yorker*, details what really happened: <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-toppling-saddam-statue-firdos-square-baghdad>.
9. Ibid.

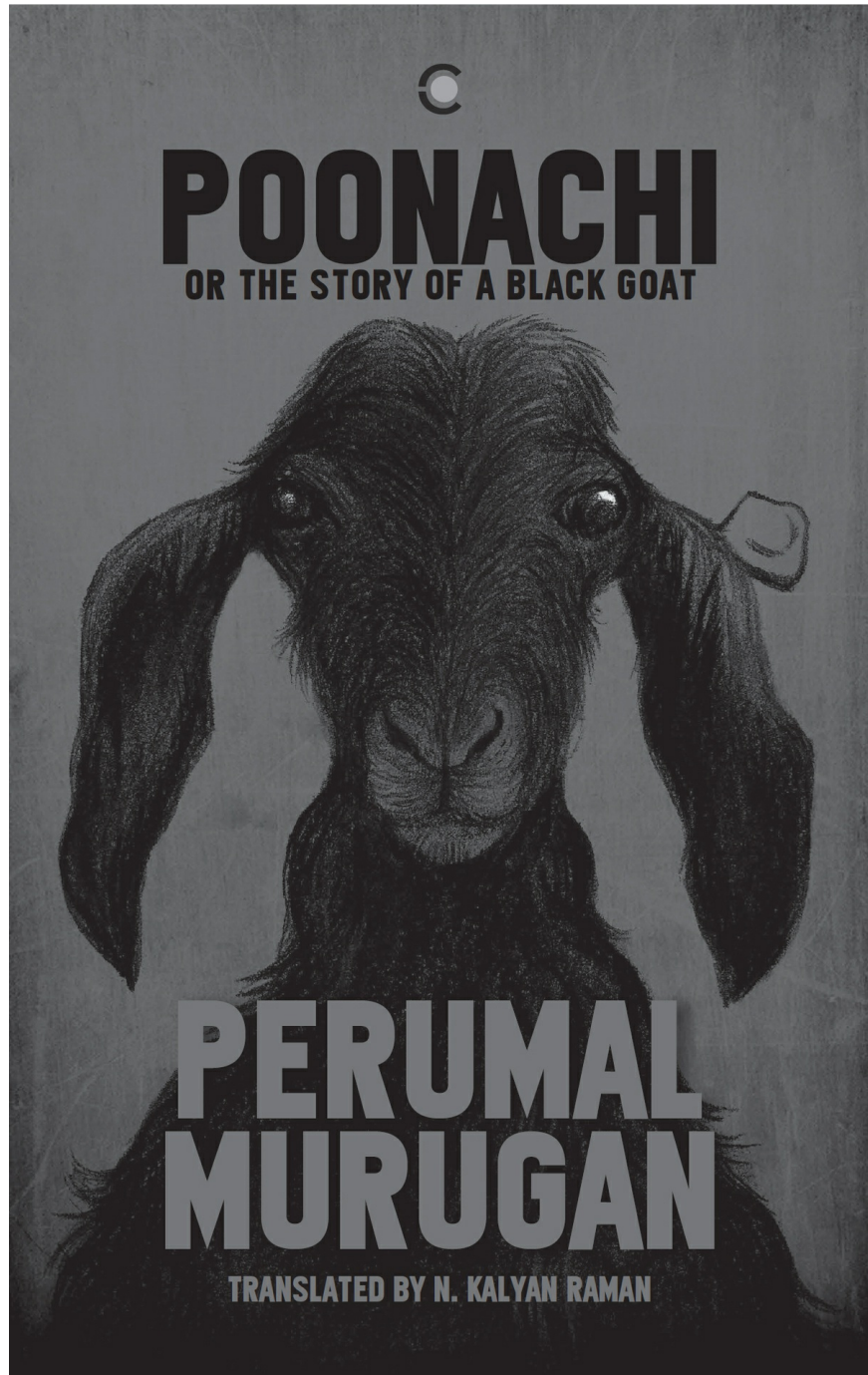
10. 'The casualties include 14,000 civilians, 5,000 security personnel and 22,000 militants between 1990 and March 2017.'
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-anatomy-of-kashmir-militancy-in-numbers/story-UncrzPTGhN22Uf1HHe64JJ.html>.
11. See the section 'Confusion about numbers' in this interview:
<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/kashmirtheforgottenconflict/>
12. See this page for more:
<https://www.sabrang.com/srikrish/sri%20main.htm>.
13. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/for-whom-shall-i-mourn/293161>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saeed Akhtar Mirza is a multiple award-winning director of films (among others, *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Ata Hai* and *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro*), documentaries (including *An Actor Prepares* and *Is Anybody Listening?*) and television serials (*Nukkad*, *Intezaar*, and others). He is also an essayist, political activist, writer and traveller. Saeed has been called an angry radical, an anarchist and a lot of other things, but he considers himself a leftist Sufi. This is his third book. He lives in Mumbai and Goa.

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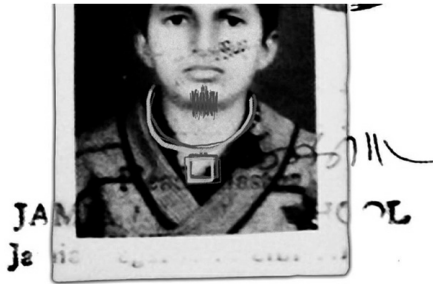
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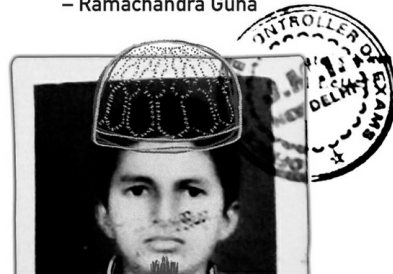


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